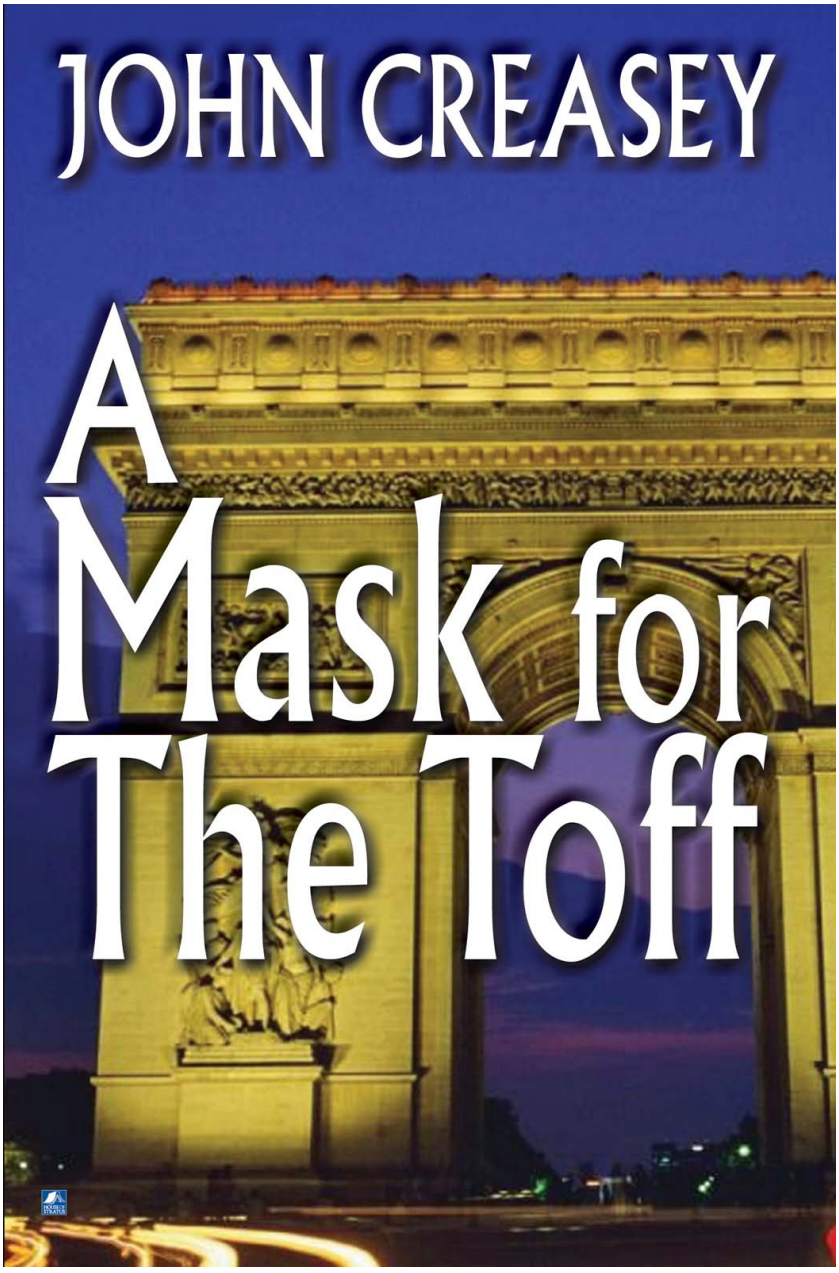
JOHN CREASEY
A Mask for The Toff

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A Mask for The Toff

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

The Fleeing Woman

A door opened, bright light shone into the dark street, and a woman appeared. Her shadow, sharp and clear, was thrown across the narrow road. She wore a light-coloured dress with short sleeves; and it was bitterly cold. She turned and ran, not looking where she was going, her high-heeled shoes rapping sharply on the pavement. Once she stumbled, steadied herself, clutched at her flowing dress and ran on.

Her mouth was open and her teeth parted.

At the first corner she turned left. As she did so, two men appeared at the open doorway, one roughly dressed, the other in a dark suit. The roughly dressed man came out first, and caught a glimpse of the woman.

"There she is!" He raced after her, and the man in the dark suit followed, but gradually dropped behind. Pounding footsteps now sounded above the clack-clack-clack of the woman's heels.

As the woman ran, blindly, fear-stricken, a door opened in the next narrow street, and a dim yellow light shone out. A small man stepped from the house, heard the woman running, and stood and stared. She was only ten yards away from him. He heard the men approaching, but could not see them.

"Wot's up?" he demanded.

The woman missed a step, and looked towards him. The light from his door was sufficient to show the terror in her eyes. Fast as thought, he said: "In 'ere, quick!"

He put out a hand to guide her. She turned to look over her shoulder, but neither of the men in pursuit had rounded the corner yet. She turned into the doorway, and the man who had spoken slammed and locked the door. He stood outside, she was in, when the roughly dressed man turned the corner and came pelting along. His companion reached the corner soon afterwards, but was already slowing down.

The little man stopped and put a cigarette to his lips as the runner drew up. "Seen anyone?"

"Who, me?"

"You heard. Seen anyone?"

"Police arter you?" asked the little man, as he flicked a match away.

"Did you see a woman come past here?"

"A woman," echoed the little man, and the second runner laboured up, gasping for breath, although the dim light from a distant street lamp suggested that he was young. "Come ter think, I did. Passed me like a streak o' light, she did."

"Where did she go?"

"Forgot me fags and 'ad to go back," said the little man promptly. "Only

took me a tick, but she wasn't in the street when I come aht again."

"Think she went into one of the houses?" The roughly dressed man, who had a harsh voice, was thick-waisted and barrel-chested, looked doubtingly into the other's eyes. The second runner, breathing more evenly now but making plenty of noise, snapped his fingers as if with impatience.

"Well, I couldn't say, I'm sure," the little man said.

His questioner muttered: "She couldn't have gone far," and moved on. The man in the dark suit followed, without a word, and the little man turned in the other direction and walked briskly away. He didn't go far, but waited at the corner from which the woman had run, and peered along the street. He saw the other two reach the next corner, and hesitate. Then they drew close together, and appeared to confer. One went straight on, the other turned right. The light was too dim for the little man to see more.

He turned up the collar of his overcoat, to hide a white muffler, and walked back. He kept close to the walls of the houses, and made no sound. When he reached his own house, he bent down and opened the letter-box; no light shone through. He opened the door with his key, and stepped swiftly inside. By the time the door was closed and re-locked, his own breath was coming quickly.

There was silence in the little house.

He called: "It's okay, it's only me."

No one responded.

"It's okay," he insisted. "I'll look after yer. You can switch the light on again."

There was still no response.

He frowned in the darkness, took out his matches, but didn't strike one. He stood peering along the narrow passage. There was a smell of cabbage and fried onions and of an antiseptic. Somewhere, a tap dripped steadily. His breathing quietened, and deliberately he held his breath. He heard no other noise, and walked slowly forward, putting out a hand to save himself from banging into door or wall. The door at the end of the passage was opposite the front door, and was closed; there was no light beneath it. He turned the handle and pushed the door gently, then stood quite still.

He heard a sound of breathing.

"You needn't worry," he whispered. "They don't know you're 'ere. I'll look after you."

No one else had been in the house when he had left it, so it was certainly the fugitive in this tiny kitchen; but she gave no answer.

He pushed the door back quietly, stepped through, and groped for the light-switch. The sound of breathing became more pronounced, and was behind him. He pressed the switch down, and heard a gasp.

Terrified eyes, brown and velvety, stared at him from the corner. The girl's glossy hair was beautiful but untidy; she was well made-up and she was lovely. She had a good figure which her dress emphasised, she would have looked at home in any society. There was a single string of pearls round her neck, and in her right hand she clenched the handle of a

saucepan, which was raised like a hammer.

The little man's gape turned slowly into a grin. He was ugly, and the front of his head was completely bald; sleek black hair, carefully brushed, lay flat over the back. His face was small and round, he had a snub nose and no chin to speak of; that little was lost in the white muffler. In spite of his ugliness there was friendliness in his smile, and the girl lowered the saucepan slowly.

"Cor lumme," said the little man, "Bert Noddy won't hurt yer. That's me —Bert Noddy. You don't 'ave to worry any more, lidy. Anyfink Downing wants I don't want 'im to 'ave. Get me? I know Sam Downing, and I don't know anyfink good abaht him. Take it easy. 'Ave a fag."

He held out a plastic cigarette-case. Her only movement was to lower the saucepan still farther, and it clanged against the green-painted wall behind her. She looked as incongruous in this tiny kitchen as a lily growing out of a clump of dandelions. There was a dresser with a flat top, on which were other saucepans; on the shelves were cups, saucers and plates. On the other side of the room was a gas-stove and a sink, with a small draining board. The smell of cooking was stronger in here, and the tap was dripping into the sink.

"Look," said Noddy earnestly, "I won't 'urt yer."

Her fear still robbed her of the freshness of her beauty. It showed in her eyes, in the tension at her lips and the rigidity of her body. She kept a hold on the saucepan, and Noddy sensed that she would raise it again if he drew nearer.

"Look," he said again, "you 'aven't lost your tongue, 'aveyer?"

She didn't speak.

"Strike me," muttered Noddy, "you give me the creeps. Listen. I know Sam Downing, that was the feller who run arter you, and I don't like 'im. He's up to no good. 'E never did no good, and ain't likely to start now. You running away from 'im was plenty to make me want to lend a 'and, see? I couldn't say anyfink plainer than that, could I?"

She swayed, making the saucepan clang against the wall again. Noddy moved in a flash, snatched the saucepan away before she could straighten up, then drew back. He put the saucepan on the gas stove.

"Can't you understand plain English?" he demanded.

He looked less self-assured than when he had first come in, and scratched his nose. The cigarette drooped from the corner of his lips, the paper scorched almost down to the end. He rolled it with his tongue from one side to the other, and frowned.

Then her lips moved. She said: *"No speak Engleesh."*

"Well," breathed Noddy. "Strike a light!"

But he looked relieved.

"I know a language you will speak," he said. "Half a tick." He disappeared, went into the small front room and took a bottle of whisky and a glass out of the flimsy sideboard. Back in the kitchen, he held them up in front of the girl who didn't speak English. "'Ave a drink."

She didn't answer, but he poured her out a nip, added a little water from the tap, and held the glass towards her. She took it and drank half at one gulp, then breathed hard and leaned against the wall, more relaxed.

Noddy made a thumbs-up sign.

"You're okay," he assured her. "Now don't worry, I'm goin' ter call me missus."

He went out of the room again, and knocked sharply on the wall opposite the stairs. After a pause, a responding tapping came from the house next door. He didn't switch on the light, but waited until he heard footsteps in the street, then opened the door. A faint glow from the kitchen shone upon a woman so large that she almost filled the doorway.

"Now wot's the matter?" she demanded impatiently. "Can't go aht for ten minutes wiv-vaht—"

"Can it," said Noddy. "We've got a visitor."

"Wot, at *this* time o' night?" The woman came in and closed the door. She had three chins, plentiful dark and greasy hair and an enormous bosom, and was dressed in a black silk blouse and a light grey skirt. "Your old man? If —"'

"One o' these days you'll use your tongue so much it'll come orf," growled Noddy. "Listen, Rosie." He held her arm tightly. "I was just goin' aht when I see Sam Downing, chasing a woman. Young woman, she was, frightened aht of 'er wits. So I brought 'er in. Sam didn't know where she went; 'e's searchin' for 'er. She's in the kitchin. She don't speak English, and I'd better see what I can do. Sam Downing's no good to 'er, and she's so scared she jumps if you speak. Now, understand?"

Rosie's eyes, rounding with astonishment at first, soon settled to normal.

"Don't you get into no trouble with a man like Downing," she said.

"If that ain't like a woman," Bert growled. "I'm going to see Bill Ebbutt. You just keep an eye on the girl. If anyone comes, Downing or a cove wiv a dark suit an' a bow tie, you 'aven't seen anyone. Don't forget."

He opened the front door again and slipped out, giving his wife no time to speak.

Chapter Two

S.O.S.

The Honourable Richard Rollison was amusing himself.

He sat in a large easy-chair, with a brandy glass cupped in his hand, and surveyed a remarkable wall in front of him. If one could forget the three other deep-cream walls each with two landscapes in oils hanging on them, the excellent if orthodox furnishing of a room which was half drawing-room, half study, and forget also the normality of Rollison's reposeful figure, it was possible to imagine that this was part of a museum. In fact, the only known counterpart was not much more than a mile away from this Mayfair flat: the Black Museum at Scotland Yard.

Rollison was recalling the histories of some of the exhibits.

There were the bloodstained chicken feathers, which reminded him of a chicken farm and murder; a top hat with a hole in the crown, worn when he had been within an inch of a bullet in the head; there were guns, knives, glass phials containing innocent looking but deadly powders; and there was also a hangman's rope, which had once been placed round the neck of a man who now knew all the secrets of the next life.

Rollison occasionally gave a gentle, reminiscent smile, which suggested that in spite of the recollections of violence, he was in peaceful mood. A door opened, and his man came in.

"Hallo, Jolly. Bedtime?"

"Unless there is anything else you require, sir?"

"Nothing," said Rollison. "I'm a little sad, Jolly. Thinking of all the things I used to do, and how reformed I am. No, I am not hankering after excitements, just mildly regretting that they weren't spread out more evenly."

"They seem to have been consistent, sir," said Jolly, and smiled faintly. Until that moment he had looked a doleful man, with a lined face and a myriad crows feet at his eyes, a rather scraggy jowl and a thin neck, which looked thinner on account of a wide collar at least two sizes too large. He had thin grey hair and brown eyes which were mournful in spite of the smile; they were also deceptive.

"Consistent?" mused Rollison. "I doubt it. But we had infinite variety. I wonder what really started me chasing after bad men, Jolly. Have you ever plumbed the depths of your philosophy to form an opinion?"

"I have not, sir," said Jolly; "I don't need to."

"You know me as well as all that? Come and sit down, help yourself to a drink and tell me all about myself."

"Thank you, sir, but I have just had my nightcap," said Jolly. Nevertheless, he pulled up another arm-chair and sat down, fully at ease; which he knew Rollison would expect. "It doesn't often happen that a man is

born with quite the same simplicity."

"Simplicity?" Rollison looked startled.

"Simplicity," insisted Jolly. There was a hint of a twinkle in his eyes, suggesting that he was enjoying this. "It is simplicity in this way, sir—you have a clear conception of the line between right and wrong. You are sentimental, which makes you take up lost causes with alacrity, and when you find a thing that is bad, you believe that it should be cut out, as a piece of wasp-bitten apple."

"Oh," said Rollison. "That's all?"

"That is what has made you the most respected, and I use the word advisedly, amateur detective of your generation," said Jolly, mildly. "Of course there are other attributes—"

The telephone bell rang.

"Timely," said Rollison, who now looked crestfallen. "I couldn't bear any more tonight. Tell whoever it is that I'm not at home, and then go to bed."

"Yes, sir."

Jolly got out of his chair quickly, and with an ease worthy of a much younger man, lifted the telephone receiver from the instrument, which was on a table just out of Rollison's reach. He listened; and he frowned.

"I am sorry, but Mr. Rollison isn't in, he—"

He stopped, obviously because the caller didn't believe him. His frown deepened, as he said: "One moment, please; I think I hear him coming in now."

He covered the mouthpiece with his hand, and added in a low-pitched voice: "I don't think you'll want to speak to him tonight, sir. It's—ah—Mr. Ebbutt."

"And why shouldn't I want to speak to Bill?"

"He doubtless wishes to urge you to change your mind about that prize-giving at his boxing-school," Jolly said unhappily, "and you have so many engagements that—"

"It's the first time I've heard of a prize-giving at the Academy," said Rollison. "Jolly, you're a menace."

He took the receiver.

"Hallo, Bill."

"Hal-*lo*, Mr. Ar!" A foghorn appeared to be at the other end of the line. "Glad I just 'appened to catch yer; got a little job that's right up your street. The minnit I 'eard abaht it, I said, Mr. Ar's the man, no doubt abaht it at all. So 'ere I am. It was a question of going to the dicks, I mean the police, or you, Mr. Ar, and I thought you'd like a go at it. Besides, Bert Noddy, you remember 'im, it's really 'is show, an' Bert wouldn't go narkin', even if it is abaht Sam Downing. What I mean to say is—"

"Hold on a minute, Bill," said Rollison, and turned to Jolly: "Nip along and get the car, I think I'm going out … Yes, Bill, carry on."

The sleek Lagonda, with Rollison at the wheel, slid through the quiet streets of the West End and the City, reaching Aldgate Pump a little after midnight.

Here, where the East End and the City met, there was a hushed silence which would remain until the early workers came out of their burrows and began to throng the streets. Soon, in a wider thoroughfare, there were some people about. A hot-chestnut man crouched over his glowing red fire, and seemed indifferent to the possibility of business. Most of these people watched the car as it purred along the Mile End Road; and many of them recognised Rollison.

He drove on until he reached a corner building, larger than most of the others along here. A street lamp immediately outside shone on the fascia board and displayed the fact that this was the *Blue Dog,* a public-house of fair repute. Rollison turned the corner and pulled up at the back of the building. Farther along, shown up by another street lamp, was a large corrugated-iron building outside which a large sign declared:

BOXING ACADEMY
B. Ebbutt, Prop.
Champs. Taught.

As Rollison got out, his tall figure thickened by a heavy belted overcoat of navy blue, a side door of the public-house opened and a large man called: "You didn't lose much time, Mr. Ar. Glad to see yer." He came forward, in his shirt sleeves, a mammoth with a vast stomach, a large, fleshy face, a corrugated forehead, small eyes and a flat nose; a villain, to look at. His great hand crushed Rollison's. "Proper do, ain't it?"

"Where is she?"

"Still at Bert's. But she's okay, I got a coupla the boys keeping their eyes open. Question is, ought you to go there, or ought we ter bring 'er away? Bring 'er away, I say, but she's so frightened. Every time Bert tries ter get 'er to leave the 'ouse, she gets 'ysterical. I fought of sending me wife to try, but you can never tell wiv Lil. Might frighten the lights aht of the kid."

"Bill *Ebbutt*!" came the shrill voice of his wife, from inside the pub and obviously some distance above their heads: "have you lost your senses? Out on a night like this wiv no coat on, you'll catch your death. Come in at once!"

"See what I mean?" said Ebbutt.

Rollison chuckled.

"Yes, Bill. Can you find me an old coat and a cap just about my size? I'll go along and see what I can do with her."

"Sure—'ere, take the key, they're just inside the front door. You can't miss 'em."

Ebbutt thrust a key into Rollison's hand, while the scolding voice of his wife came again, in tart rebuke. Rollison, smiling, walked along to the Academy and opened the front door. When he pressed down a switch, a big room, with the two rings, the punchbags and all the equipment of a gymnasium, showed in a bright light. Hanging on the wall were several coats, hats and other oddments of clothing, kept by Bill Ebbutt for the

benefit of those unfortunates who needed clothes and couldn't afford to buy them.

Rollison tried on a coat; it was large, but otherwise fitted tolerably well. He wound a grey muffler round his neck, put on a peaked cap and pulled the peak low over his eyes, and drew on his gloves. Then he went out and stamped about on a patch of freshly dug ground outside the building, to smear his shoes. That done, he put his own coat into his car, and walked briskly along the street towards the home of Bert Noddy, whom he knew slightly.

On the telephone, Rollison had been told everything Ebbutt knew, and Ebbutt had never been a man to repeat words for their own sake. It was a curious affair, and the girl who couldn't speak English was obviously in distress.

Rollison knew Downing by reputation as one of the nastier characters of the East End. He also knew that it was rumoured that Downing sometimes moved in High Society. At others, he moved on a rather lower scale, at Pentonville, Wandsworth or Dartmoor.

Rollison had to take two turnings right and one left before he reached Brill Street, where Bert Noddy lived. A gas-lamp shone at the corner, but the light was poor; all the street lighting in these East End side streets was bad. Yet he turned the corner cautiously. The rubber heels of his shoes muffled the noise. He peered along, expecting only to see one of Bill Ebbutt's boys lurking near Noddy's house. He saw no one.

The man was probably hiding.

He walked quickly but with little sound. There were a few lighted windows, but most of the street was in darkness. Near one window he saw a heap on the ground; it looked like an old coat, flung carelessly away; but coats were not as cheap as that in the East End of London. He kept close to the wall, to lessen the risk of being seen. As he drew nearer, he saw that it was more than a coat; it was a man. He began to whistle, very softly, and stopped to look farther along. There was no sign of movement. He reached the man and bent down on one knee; and his whistling stopped abruptly. There was blood over the man's head, more smeared on his cheeks.

Rollison didn't feel for his pulse or do anything to see whether he was alive, but went on, still close to the houses.

He heard a car engine, and headlights shone along the road which intersected this one.

He stepped into a doorway; by flattening himself against it, there was room to hide. The car turned the corner, and the narrow street was bathed in its silvery light. He heard it stop; but the engine wasn't switched off. He peered along and saw a man in a dark suit jump from the car and dash into a house.

Rollison moved swiftly.

By the time he reached the doorway of Bert Noddy's house, where light shone out, he heard a muted whisper: "Put that light out!"

Someone obeyed; only the headlamps of the car now gave light, and that

did not touch the front of the house. There were heavy footsteps, and then a man appeared, carrying a woman over his shoulder. He held her round the knees, and her hair fell towards the ground; Rollison could just see that. The man carrying her looked neither right nor left, but reached the car and pulled open the near door.

Another man hurried from the house.

Rollison, pressed close against the wall, let him pass, then shot out his right arm and clutched his shoulder, pulling him round. He struck with his left, a jab to the chin. He felt the pain of the blow through his gloves. The man grunted, and his knees bent – and as he fell, the man carrying the woman put her into the car, dumping her on the back seat, and turned round.

He was a split second too soon for Rollison.

He started: "*What*—" and then his right hand flashed to his pocket, and he dodged to one side. The man – Downing – pulled out a life preserver, came forward and smashed at Rollison. Rollison moved his hand, but the blow caught him on the shoulder, numbing it. Downing brought his knee up, towards Rollison's groin. Rollison dodged to one side, and Downing was momentarily on one leg. Rollison hit him, not hard enough to hurt but quite hard enough to bowl him over; but as Downing fell, another man rushed at Rollison from behind. Rollison heard him coming, but was too late to escape a blow on the back of the head. The cap saved him from the worst effect, but he reeled away, only capable of feeble defence. He turned instinctively so that his back was against the car and he couldn't be attacked from behind again. He saw a man leap at him, and heard metal smash against the car.

He shot out his foot, and fended the assailant off. The man he had knocked out first was getting to his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, Rollison saw Downing. Downing didn't join in the fight, but opened the car door. It came within a few inches of Rollison. Rollison fended the other man off, and slammed the door. It hit Downing's hand; he heard a gasp of pain, saw a big, vicious face twisted with rage and agony. But at three to one he couldn't hold out for long, and—

A whistle sounded shrilly, and suddenly men pounded along the street towards the car, from the direction from which Rollison had come. Downing started and stared towards this new threat. He had his right hand under his arm, but moved and spoke as if he were in no pain.

"Run for it. *Run."*

"But—" protested one of the other men.

"I said *run*."

All three turned and raced towards the corner, while the others came on from the far end. Rollison straightened up. The police had their moments, even if Bill Ebbutt and Bert Noddy preferred to avoid them, on principle.

In fact there were no police; only three men, dressed much as Rollison was then.

"Okay, Mr. Ar?" One man burst out, as they drew near.

"Yes. Get after them."

“Sure!” They sped past, while Rollison pushed back his cap, rubbed his head gingerly, and wished that his shoulder would stop aching. The sound of footsteps faded, he had no idea whether the second trio would catch up on the first; he doubted it. Bill Ebbutt had doubtless sent him a bodyguard, and one of its members had used a police whistle. Rollison opened the rear door of the car, groped for the light, and pressed the switch down.

The girl sat huddled in a corner, her eyes closed. There were puffy red marks at her throat, but she was breathing normally. He found a big lump on her right temple, but no other signs of injury.

Then her lips moved.

“Madame!” she moaned. “Madame Thysson. Madame …”

Her voice trailed off; and she didn’t speak again, showed no reaction when he spoke to her.

Chapter Three

Home From Home

One of Ebbutt's men came back, panting. He did not need to report that Downing and the two men had dodged him and his friends. Rollison took off his coat and put it round the girl. The others returned as Rollison backed out of the car.

"How is she?" a man asked.

"She'll do. One of you get a doctor, and the other telephone for the police. Yes, we must have the police."

He didn't wait for comment, but went straight into Noddy's house, putting on all the lights. In the kitchen he found Noddy and his wife, both unconscious. The woman was lying across the little man, and beginning to come round. Noddy had an ugly wound in his forehead, but was breathing. Rollison hurried outside, where one of the three men was on guard by the car.

"She's coming to," he said.

The girl who couldn't speak English was now sitting upright, and blinking in the faint light of the roof lamp.

"I'll look after her," Rollison said. "When the police arrive, tell them I took her away."

"Okay, Mr. Ar."

Rollison opened the rear door, and the girl pressed back against the corner. He spoke in French.

"Do you speak French, madame?"

She started up.

"Yes, yes!"

"I am going to take you to my apartment, where you will be with friends," said Rollison. "We'll soon be there."

He smiled and closed the door, leaving the light on. The engine started at a touch, and he drove fast through the narrow streets, passing the *Blue Dog*. Two policemen and a police-car stood outside the pub, which would not make Bill Ebbutt happy or please his wife. Rollison swung right, away from the West End, drove for several miles and then turned off the main road. He chose a long, narrow side-road and drove slowly; no car turned after him. Satisfied that he wasn't followed, he went straight back to the West End, but he did not go as far as his flat in Gresham Terrace. He pulled up near Piccadilly, where the colourful advertisement lights were out and which was deserted but for a few hurrying figures and two policemen standing at a corner and talking.

A taxi came along.

Rollison whistled to it, and beckoned the policemen; they came up at once.

"You'll probably get a call to look for my car," Rollison said. "Don't let anyone drive it away."

The taxi drew up, and he opened the door, then beckoned to the girl.

She climbed out, unsteadily, and needed help.

"I don't understand quite, sir," said one of the policemen. "If you'll tell me—"

"My friend is ill, I can't stop," said Rollison, and pressed a card into the constable's hand. "That will find me. Gresham Terrace, driver." He got into the taxi after the girl, and slammed the door.

Beneath the light of a lamp the policeman looked down at the card, and read Rollison's name and address. He frowned as the other man leaned over his shoulder, then stifled an exclamation.

"Rollison! Well, I'm beggared!"

"Why should you be?" asked the other man, and absently turned the card over. He found himself looking at a pencilled drawing, of a top hat, a monocle, a bow tie and a cigarette in a long holder, all so placed that they suggested a face; but the face wasn't there.

"See?" The other man was eager. "Rollison—the Toff. Often wanted to meet him, I have. I wonder what he's up to now. Nice bit of stuff with him, wasn't she?"

A light was on at the front of the flat, which was on the third and top floor of 22g Gresham Terrace. When Rollison reached the landing, with the girl's arm in his, the front door opened. Jolly, still dressed, stood aside and bowed slightly as they passed; if he felt any surprise, he showed no sign of it.

Rollison led the girl across the square hall and into the main room. He guided her so that she reached a chair with her back to the trophy wall. She sat down heavily. He took the coat from her shoulders and flung it over a chair, calling to Jolly:

"Coffee, I think, and plenty of sugar. If anyone from the Yard rings up, I'll speak to them."

"Very good, sir."

Rollison smiled down at the girl. He was tall and lean and handsome in an engaging, swash-buckling way, his grey eyes held laughter, and in spite of the flecks of grey in his dark hair, he looked young. He took out cigarettes and proffered them, but she didn't take one. He slipped the case away without lighting up, and spoke to her in fluent French.

"You needn't worry at all, and you can stay here for the night, or perhaps longer. I'll ask you a lot of questions in the morning. I shall have a doctor here soon, to see you and give you something to steady your nerves. You needn't answer my questions tonight, unless you want to." Thank you, *m'sieu."*

"Now, I'm going to look at your head," Rollison said. "They hit you, didn't they?"

"So hard, *m'sieu."*

He felt through the luxuriant brown hair, which gleamed in a light just behind her, and she winced. The large swelling remained on the temple, but there was no sign of blood. The puffiness at her throat remained.

"You'll be all right."

He crossed to the telephone and dialled a neighbouring doctor; it was some minutes before there was an answer, in a sleepy voice.

"Sorry it has to be this hour," Rollison said, "but what do you do with a young woman who's had a crack over the head that laid her out for nearly an hour, and who needs a good night's sleep?"

The man at the other end of the line said promptly: "Put her to bed."

"But supposing the police want to question her, and she isn 't fit for questioning?"

"Blast you," growled the doctor at the other end. "I'll come over."

"That's a good idea," said Rollison, as if surprised. "Thanks. Bring the mystic potions and whatnot in your little black bag, won't you?"

He put down the receiver, and lit a cigarette from force of habit. Jolly had come in and, without a word, put a woollen cardigan round the girl's shoulders, then disappeared. The room was already warm.

Rollison longed to ask a dozen questions, but wanted her to speak first. She leaned forward in her chair, looking at him intently; she hadn't so much as glanced away from him since they had arrived. Now, she looked round the room, then raised one hand.

"Please, why do you help me?"

"You need help."

"So very much," she said. "That man—"

"The Frenchman?"

"No, no! That other man." She shivered, and closed her eyes; and had justified his guess that the man in the dark suit was a Frenchman. He rubbed his damaged shoulder gently, for it was aching, and waited for her to go on. "He did not want me to go away from that terrible house."

"I wonder why?"

"I do not know," she said, with convincing earnestness. "I had not seen him before. Marcel, he brought me. I should not have come, it was foolish of me to come, but Marcel wanted it so much. I do not understand why he should want to keep me here." Her eyes were deep-brown pools of inquiry, but fear still lurked in the background. "I do not understand anything about it, *m'sieu."*

"Do you know Marcel well?"

"Yes! We are to be married."

Rollison said mildly: "Well, well. Does madame—"

The telephone bell rang, and the girl glanced towards the instrument. Rollison silently confounded it, and left the answering to Jolly. He pulled up a chair and sat astride it, close to his guest.

"Did Madame Thysson approve?"

She didn't answer, but stared as if in terror, then turned her eyes towards the telephone. It was as if she sensed that trouble was coming to her from

this call. Had that or the name frightened her? Jolly's murmuring voice sounded in the background, and stopped.

"Who is it?" Rollison asked testily.

"A gentleman who will not give his name, sir," said Jolly. "He says that he must speak to you urgently." Jolly plainly thought that Rollison should do nothing of the kind. "Shall I tell him you're out?"

"I'll speak to him."

Rollison stood up, puzzled by the girl's fixed stare. It was as if the telephone had some evil association. He picked up the receiver, conscious of that piercing gaze.

"Rollison speaking."

A man said harshly: "Listen, you're asking for trouble. Get that girl out of your flat quick, or you'll regret it."

It was probably Downing; he spoke breathlessly, as if he had been running, and loudly, perhaps because he knew that he was wasting his time. The girl leaned forward in her chair, more intent and fearful even than before.

Rollison might have been talking to a bosom friend.

"Really?" he said. "That's very interesting."

The girl's hands were clenched; she wasn't fooled. But before the man on the line spoke again, the front-door bell rang. Jolly started to walk towards the hall, then changed his mind and hurried through a door into a passage which led off the big room to the kitchen. The bell rang again, the caller was impatient; policemen were often impatient.

The man on the other end of the telephone seemed to have plenty of patience.

"You needn't be so clever, Rollison. You don't know what you're doing. It's dynamite. Bring that girl to me. I'm waiting at the Burlington Arcade, Burlington Gardens end. Don't waste any time."

"I hate wasting time," drawled Rollison.

In spite of his drawl and his poker face, the girl was still sitting up tensely; he was sure that she sensed the nature of the call. Jolly came in and hurried across the room at the third ring at the front door bell, and left the sitting-room door open.

"You'll hate what happens to you if you play around with this," said the man with the harsh voice. "Listen to me, Rollison—"

"I'm listening," Rollison assured him.

He heard a sound in the hall, and it made him swing round towards the door. There was a gasp and a thud. He put the receiver down quietly, and turned to the door, approaching it in long strides. From it, he saw a man who could see into the room and so see the girl, but could not notice Rollison, who stood flat against the wall.

The girl screamed. Rollison pushed the door, and it banged against the man's foot. Simultaneously a shot roared out. The girl screamed again, and this time stopped with frightening abruptness.

The door swung back against Rollison. The man, on the turn, was still

pointing the gun at the girl. Rollison jumped forward, striking at the outstretched arm and pushing the gun away. A bullet smacked into the floor.

The gunman struck at him.

Rollison said: “Too bad,” and drove his fist into the other’s face, with the weight of a hundred and seventy pounds behind it. The man rocked back on his heels, then swayed forward. Rollison hit him again, and the sound of the impact was like the report of an air-pistol. The man toppled back into the hall and hit the floor, stretched out cold, his gun close to his limp hand. As Rollison picked it up he heard footsteps on the stairs. There was no respite, no time even to go to the girl or to Jolly.

Chapter Four

Doctor's Orders

Rollison didn't glance round at the girl, caught a glimpse of Jolly, who was picking himself up and looking greenly pale, and stepped to the side of the door. But the newcomer ran boldly up the last flight of stairs, and called out in a matter-of-fact voice: "Urgent as that, is it?"

Rollison said: "Come in. The girl's in the next room."

A middle-aged man, wearing an overcoat and carrying an attaché case, hurried in. He was large, red-faced and fair-haired, and had a slightly bucolic look, with protuberant blue eyes and fleshy lips.

"What—"

"Hurry," Rollison said.

The doctor gulped, stared at the fallen man and the gun now in Rollison's hand, and then obeyed. Jolly stood swaying. The gunman was still stretched out, with his eyes closed.

"Watch him, Jolly," Rollison said.

He went out on to the landing, closed the front door and stood in darkness, listening. The loudest sound was that of his own breathing, but that quietened and there was silence.

He started slowly down the stairs.

The picture was clear in his mind, with many of its implications. These men so desperately wanted to get the girl away that they would take any risk. The gunman was undoubtedly Marcel, the Frenchman, who was to marry her. Sam Downing had telephoned so as to keep Rollison at the telephone while the Frenchman dealt with Jolly. Whether the Frenchman had come simply to kill, or only to attack Rollison and take the girl away, could be debated later. What mattered was the possibility that Downing and perhaps others were waiting outside, with a car.

Downing must have recognised Rollison; that was why they had known where to come.

Rollison reached the ground floor. Cold air swept in from the open front door, which was seldom locked; Dr. Mason hadn't troubled to close it. There was no car immediately opposite. Rollison went into the porch, peered along, and saw a car parked at the far end of Gresham Terrace; it hadn't been there when he had arrived, and Mason lived only three doors away. Rollison tried to pick out the figure of a man standing near the car, but couldn't be sure whether it was a man or a shadow. If he went farther into the street, whoever was there would know what had gone wrong.

The sound of the engine of the car suddenly shattered the quiet. Headlights stabbed out, bathing the houses opposite the end of the street in powerful light. The car moved off and swung round the corner.

"Now I can take a deep breath," Rollison confided to the looming grey

houses. “See you later, Sam.”

Back in his own front hall, he closed the door quietly. He could hear Mason talking, presumably to Jolly, but the voices did not come from the living-room. He didn’t know whether the girl had been hurt, but hadn’t much doubt that a bullet had silenced her scream. He went into the room, where a door was open at the far end near the dining-alcove. This led to the passage, the bedrooms and the kitchen.

There was a sound, as of tearing.

Rollison went along and paused at the open door of the spare room. The girl lay on the bed, her dress off, a silk slip leaving her arms and shoulders bare; Mason was supporting her with one arm. Her eyes were closed, and there was a patch of lint and cotton wool on her forehead, above the right eye.

Jolly was tearing a pillow-slip across and across into narrow strips.

Rollison said: “Didn’t you bring bandages, Doc?”

Mason glanced up.

“One day I’ll be doing this to you, only it will be a waste of time.”

He took a strip of the pillow-case and began to bandage the girl’s head.

“How bad?”

“It could be worse,” said Mason. “Glancing wound, the bone wasn’t touched. She’s a lucky woman. She might be all right tomorrow, but it might be several days before you can get any sense out of her. I’ll be able to tell you in the morning if she ought to be moved to hospital.”

Rollison nodded. Mason finished the bandaging, and lowered the girl’s head gently on to the pillow. Jolly stepped forward and covered her with blankets and eiderdown. On the foot of the bed was a brassiere and a narrow suspender belt, on the floor a pair of silver shoes. Rollison crossed to the bed and turned the sheet down; the string of pearls was still round the lovely neck.

He put his hands behind her neck and unfastened the pearls, then drew them away gently. He took the string to the light and inspected the lustre thoroughly, holding them up, turning his head this way and that. At last he frowned, screwed the string up and tossed it into the air.

“Now what are you looking so clever about?” asked Mason gruffly.

“Just asking myself questions. Robbery wasn’t the motive, or she wouldn’t have been allowed to keep two thousand pounds’ worth of oyster babies, would she?”

“Are they *real?”*

“They’re as much real pearls as you’re a real doctor,” Rollison said. “Thanks a lot—come and have a drink for your trouble.”

“You’ll get a bill,” said Mason, “but I’ll have that drink.”

Rollison dropped the pearls on to the handsome walnut desk which stood slantwise across a corner, within hand’s reach of the trophy wall, then opened a cabinet and displayed a connoisseur’s variety of bottles and glasses. Mason glanced at the wall, shook his head as if to say that all this was beyond him, then took a whisky and soda. All was quiet now. Jolly

came in from the hall, still looking pale.

"Come and help yourself," Rollison said. "Then get to bed, Jolly."

"I'm quite all right, sir, I assure you. The—ah—assailant struck me in the solar plexus, the effect was only temporary. As a precaution, I have tied his wrists and his ankles. He is still unconscious but I don't think he will be like that for long."

Mason nearly dropped his glass.

"Of course, that chap in the hall!"

Rollison glanced at his own right hand; it was grazed and a little blood oozed up.

"He did the dirty work, but he wasn't alone; we haven't caught them all. Is that drink as you like it?"

"Yes, thanks. What is all this, Rolly?"

"You sound as precise as a policeman. I don't know. I can tell you what happened but can't tell you why, and I'll have to tell everything to a policeman soon. Wait, if you're really dying to hear."

"No, I must get off."

"She comes all the way from France, and some one tried to kidnap her. She had a lucky break, then someone suggested I might care to lend a hand. I brought her here, and the kidnappers tried to put her out of this world. It couldn't be simpler than that, could it?"

"Simple!" groaned Mason. "You be careful or you'll be a case of simple violent death. I must go, I'm expecting a night call anyhow; shan't get a wink of sleep if I don't make a move." He finished his whisky hurriedly. "Shall I send a nurse?"

"That's what I call efficiency. Yes, please."

Rollison saw him out of the flat.

The Frenchman in the dark suit was beginning to open his eyes. Jolly had left him exactly where he had fallen, with his hands tied in front of him and his ankles bound tightly together; he looked as if he would fit neatly into a coffin. Rollison dragged him by the shoulders away from the door, and propped him up so that he was sitting against the wall, near the living-room. His own left shoulder was aching.

"Jolly."

Jolly appeared at the door.

"Have a look at my shoulder, will you? I didn't want to keep Dr. Mason."

Rollison took off his coat and coat-shirt swiftly, and stood in singlet and trousers. The shoulder looked all right when he squinted down. Jolly began to prod, and Rollison winced. The man sitting against the wall groaned and opened his eyes, but didn't seem to realise where he was or what had happened. Jolly raised Rollison's arm.

"Did that hurt, sir?"

"Not much."

Jolly moved the arm again.

"More, but still not much."

Jolly made a third attempt.

"Twinges," said Rollison.

"I doubt if it is more than a bruise, sir; if it were a dislocation you would have much more pain. I will get the embrocation."

Jolly went off.

The Frenchman stared into Rollison's face, as if beginning to recall what had happened.

He was good looking in an effeminate way, with wavy, glossy black hair, pale features, a weak mouth which was very red, almost as if he used lipstick. He was in his early twenties, and dressed to kill. Diamonds shone at his cuffs; everything about him spelt money. He licked his lips and closed his eyes, as if realisation of his plight were too much for him.

"What do they do to you in France for attempted murder?" asked Rollison mildly.

The man didn't speak.

"Of course, it might really be murder. I think one of the men at Brill Street was dead. Don't they chop off your head, or something? Madame Guillotine—flash, chop, drop and your head rolls into the sawdust. Interesting survival of the old-fashioned, but effective, isn't it? Any of your friends been beheaded?"

The weak face showed fear, as evident as the girl's. The man understood every word, and his blood-shot eyes were opened wide. He shifted his position and tried to move his hands, but they were tied securely.

"In England, we still hang murderers," said Rollison. "Barbaric, isn't it? But in spite of arguments to the contrary, quite a deterrent to men of violence. Why did you try to kill your fiancée?"

The man licked his lips.

"Who is she?" asked Rollison.

The man wouldn't speak, but averted his gaze. Rollison squatted down on his haunches, and then Jolly appeared, with a bottle of embrocation.

"Who is she?" repeated Rollison sharply.

The Frenchman turned his head away and let his chin drop on to his chest, as if he were fainting. Jolly rubbed steadily, and soon the bruised shoulder began to sting. Rollison stood up, looking down on his prisoner. Probably it would, not take a great deal of pressure to make the young man talk, and he would be more likely to talk to Rollison than to the police; but the police would soon be here. For the first time, Rollison regretted sending for them so quickly.

He said abruptly: "All right, keep it to yourself. You'll be charged with murder in the morning, and unless you tell the truth, you won't have a chance."

The man didn't move.

"I think it would be more convenient if you were to sit in a chair, sir," said Jolly. "Would you rather leave this until you have had time to persuade him to tell you why he did this thing?"

"No," said Rollison, "there isn't much time, I may have to go out again."

He sat down, and Jolly kept rubbing. The Frenchman glanced up,

covertly, then dropped his gaze again, but the silence was getting on his nerves. He began to lick his lips, and then to move his head from side to side.

"I think that will do, sir," said Jolly.

"Thanks." Rollison moved again, and now the Frenchman looked up at him with fear naked in his eyes, his lips twitching.

"Who's the girl?"

There was no answer.

"Who is Madame Thysson?" Rollison demanded sharply.

The Frenchman's head jerked up, as if the name itself struck terror. His lips worked, but he didn't speak. He kept silent until footsteps clumped on the stairs, and Rollison knew that the police had arrived.

Superintendent William Grice of Scotland Yard did not like getting out of bed after midnight, and might have been tempted to leave the night's inquiries to the Division and to a junior at the Yard, but for the magic in the name of Rollison. Grice had been to Brill Street, talked to the police at the Divisional Station, gone to Scotland Yard and studied the dossier of Samuel Arthur Downing, and liked nothing of what he read. Downing had twice been convicted of robbery with violence, and by the age of forty-three had spent fourteen years in prison. He was still on his ticket-of-leave and had reported regularly to the nearest police-station since his last release. He was classified as *"Independent—No Trade or Profession"*, which meant that he had never earned his living. There were two notes on the card, which showed that he had served for twelve months in the Armed Forces before being jailed for theft; and much of that time he had spent in France. The final remark in the dossier was: "*Dangerous"*.

On the way to Rollison's flat, Grice reflected that it was in the order of things that Rollison had contrived to clash with Downing. There were the little crooks in the East End to whom Rollison was a friend; but there were some who hated the Toff simply because of his reputation and because they knew what he thought about them and would do to them if he had half a chance. There was no doubt that Downing knew of and disliked Rollison.

Rollison would not be impressed by that.

One part of Grice's mind could easily become angry with Rollison, who was prepared to take the law into his own hands with a carefree abandon which made all dutiful policemen gnash their teeth; another part admired and respected the man – in fact they were good friends.

Not everyone at the Yard had a good word to say for Rollison; but the hard core of common sense in most of the C.I.D. men forced them to admit that Rollison had scored some remarkable successes, especially in cases which the orthodox police methods found difficult to break. One group of Yard officers, mostly among the lower ranks, regarded Rollison with great goodwill, because he was a constant thorn in the flesh of authority and of smugness and complacency. He asked no more of a man than he should do his job properly. If there were times when he made a fool of a senior officer,

there were dozens of others when junior officers had reason to thank him for help, often given anonymously.

Whatever the attitude of any one Yard man to wards Rollison, one thing was certain; at the Yard, as well as in the East End, the man known as the Toff would not be ignored.

In those early hours, Grice decided that he would be mildly censorious and a little heavy handed. That would probably make no difference to Rollison's course of action, but might goad him into saying more than he intended to say. For Grice took it for granted that in spite of what he had been told, Rollison had in fact been interested in the mysterious French girl, and in Downing, before Ebbutt had sent his message.

Jolly opened the door to him.

"Hallo, Jolly," said Grice, almost heartily. "Still up."

"There has been a little excitement, Mr. Grice," said Jolly. He stood aside, watching the Superintendent closely, getting keen satisfaction from Grice's exclamation, when Grice saw the man sitting against the wall. "I think Mr. Rollison can see you," added Jolly, with mild malice. "Please come in."

Chapter Five

Bright Morning

Grice was tall and rangy of figure, with brown hair going thin on top, brown eyes, a sallow complexion; he looked rather like a wax figure. On one side of his face and forehead was an ugly red scar, the result of an explosion when he had been working on a case with Rollison. He had a pointed chin and a prominent nose, the skin stretching so tightly across the bridge that there it was almost white.

He had learned to take nothing for granted when on a visit to Gresham Terrace, and recovered quickly from the shock of seeing the man on the floor.

Rollison appeared at the doorway, a dressing-gown over his singlet and trousers.

"Welcome, Bill! You're late!"

"Too late," said Grice. "If I'd started a bit earlier I might have kept you out of mischief."

"The undying optimist," beamed Rollison. "Let the Frenchie be for a bit, and I'll tell you the whole sad story. Including the part you won't believe."

"That'll be most of it," said Grice.

"You haven't changed," the Toff said sadly. They sat down in the big room, and Grice said, "Thanks," when Jolly suggested coffee. It was a little after two o'clock.

"First, Bill—two hours ago, I was sitting all peaceful like, brooding over my past sins, and I hadn't a notion that violence would disturb the peaceful night," the Toff began. "That's the part you won't believe. The rest …"

Grice was a good listener, Rollison a believer in brevity. But he made the picture live, from the moment that Bill Ebbut had first telephoned. He came at last to his failure to make the Frenchman talk, then lit a cigarette and let smoke coil from his lips.

"Nice and untidy, isn't it?"

"At least you had the sense to report at once. You must be losing your grip."

"Thanks. That will make me rush like mad to tell the police about the antics of wicked men. Before you go on, what's the news from Brill Street?"

"No one's dead, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I meant." Rollison looked much more cheerful. "I was afraid one chap mightn't come round."

"He's on the danger list, but the chances are that he'll pull through. He was one of Ebbutt's men, who was keeping a watch on Noddy's house. Both of them were attacked. Three men were involved, altogether—this man here, Downing and another, who hasn't been identified. Did you see him?"

"I didn't recognise him."

Grice grunted.

"I hope that's true. This job shows an unmistakable French angle, and you can't play the fool with the French police as you sometimes do with us. They've a sharp way of dealing with amateurs."

Rollison grinned.

"On the other hand, it might serve a turn if you had a brush with them," Grice mused. "You'd learn to appreciate the Yard more, Rolly. Is this gospel truth? You didn't know any of these men before tonight?"

"I know vaguely of Downing. Real bad man, isn't he?"

"As bad as they come, and dangerous."

"That's why Noddy helped the girl. She has a lot to thank Noddy for." Rollison leaned back and looked at Grice through his lashes. "We both start from scratch, and the prisoner's yours. With judicious pressure, he might talk."

"Didn't you try to make him?"

"Not seriously, I thought I'd leave something to you. The girl can't be moved, and probably won't come round tonight," Rollison added. "I've arranged for a nurse, who'll stay on duty with her, and if there's any outpouring of explanations, I'll let you know. I doubt if there will be." He stretched across and picked up the pearls, then tossed them into Grice's lap. "You'd better have a look at these, and keep them safe. Motive is not robbery, you see."

"Any idea what the motive is?"

"I simply know that the girl is terrified, and that if a certain Madame Thysson had known what was going to happen, she would never have allowed the girl to leave the gay city. Ever heard of a Madame Thysson?"

"No. Have you?"

"Certainly not," said Rollison. He stifled a yawn. "Sorry, Bill. Not boredom, exhaustion. You've a call out for Downing and the mystery man, I hope."

"Yes."

"Any help from the car I left at Piccadilly Circus?"

"I haven't heard," said Grice. "Can you tell me when the girl and the Frenchman reached England?"

"No."

"Anything to identify the girl in her handbag?"

"She didn't have one."

"Or in the man's pockets?"

"I haven't looked," said Rollison, virtuously.

"You're either lying or slipping fast," said Grice, and smiled unexpectedly. "All right, Rolly. Let me give you—"

"A solemn word of warning," interrupted Rollison, straight-faced. "There is much here which I will not understand. I cannot play the fool with the *Sûreté Générale* as I can with Scotland Yard. I am to be a good boy, tell you everything, and then go away and have a nice holiday in the country, because Downing is dangerous and may have dangerous friends. Warning

noted."

Grice laughed.

"I'll take the Frenchman away," he said; "at least you won't be able to try to persuade him to talk."

Rollison woke, and through the lashes of one eye, studied Jolly's back. Jolly was at the window, drawing the curtains. Bright sunlight shone into one corner of the room, and as it was nearly the end of November, that meant that it was late; at least nine o'clock and probably later. Rollison yawned, and opened the other eye. Jolly came from the window, and asked: "Shall I pour out, sir?"

"Thanks."

By the side of the bed was a morning tea-tray, the newspapers and the post. Rollison sat up, opened the most sensational of the three papers, and put it away quickly. He glanced through the others, and stopped at a headline, titled, *"Woman Murdered"*.

"Lady Murren, widow of Sir Henry Murren, was found shot through the heart at her Mayfair flat last night. The discovery was made by her maid, who returned from a visit to relatives and found her mistress lying in the drawing-room. The flat had been ransacked. Scotland Yard officers …"

Rollison said thoughtfully: "Sir Henry Murren, Jolly. Who was he?"

"Very prominent in Anglo-French spheres before the war, sir. He lived in Paris for a number of years."

"I thought there was a French association with the name. Sure?"

"There is no doubt, sir."

"Thanks," said Rollison. "Anything in the post?"

"Nothing of consequence, sir."

"Our guest?"

"She woke up twice during the night, but the nurse reports that she has been comfortable, and there is ho fever. Dr. Mason looked in a few minutes ago, and appears to be quite satisfied."

"Better than it might have been. Has she talked?"

"No, sir. Mr. Grice has sent a man, who is waiting in the kitchen. He said that he has orders to sit in the room with the girl, but I refused to allow him access until I had consulted you."

"Hmm. Grice trying to stymie us, he was too affable last night." Rollison yawned and sipped his tea. "We could do without the chap, but I suppose we mustn't expect miracles. Bath ready?"

"It will be, in five minutes, sir."

"Any bright ideas?"

"I have inquired, and am assured that there will be no difficulty in getting accommodation on any of the aeroplanes to Paris today. There is always more room during the winter, and an hour's notice will be sufficient."

Rollison sipped again.

"Madame Thysson?"

"I telephoned Mr. Latimer, of the *Record,* and he has promised to call at

half-past ten," said jolly. "He has just completed a series of articles on Paris for his newspaper, as you may recall, and it occurred to me that he was the most likely man to assist us. I did not mention Madame Thysson to him."

"Jolly, you improve with keeping."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Jolly.

"Tell the flat-foot in the kitchen that as soon as I've finished my bath, I'll come and see him."

Jolly inclined his head, and went out. He enjoyed nothing more than suggesting that he was an automaton, and seldom showed any sign of human emotion; unless one knew him well, as few did.

Rollison poured himself out a second cup of tea, and got out of bed. His shoulder was only slightly painful. He rasped his hand over his dark stubble, bathed his face in cold water, and then went into the spare room.

A solidly built nurse looked up from a chair, where she was sitting and knitting.

"Good morning, sir."

"'Morning. Any change?"

"She is likely to—she *is* awake," said the nurse, and jumped up.

The girl looked into Rollison's eyes, not blankly: she had been awake when he had come in. She even smiled a little. The turban-like bandage could not hide the fact that she was lovely; and her face wasn't marked. She looked pale, but even thus, her complexion was a maiden's dream. She moved her hands as he approached, and he took them lightly, and spoke in French.

"Are you better?"

"Much, much better."

"Wonderful! What else can I do to help you?"

The smiled faded.

"Tell me," urged Rollison.

She said in a low-pitched, earnest voice: "I am so frightened. Please allow me to stay here."

The nurse looked blankly from the patient to Rollison. The girl was watching Rollison closely; and he did not see any fear in her eyes. She was rested, probably had no more than a headache, and wanted to stay here. But she was no longer as frightened as she had been last night.

"Don't you want your friends to know you're safe?"

"I—I have no friends."

"Madame Thysson?"

The girl looked blank; but a shadow that might have been fear entered her eyes.

"I do not understand."

"Don't you know a Madame Thysson?"

"Thysson? Thysson? No, *m'sieu,* I do not recall the name. I have no friends, I do not want to go—anywhere. Last night, I was so frightened. I remember that. I was attacked, yes?" She put a long, slim hand to her forehead, and touched the bandage. "Yes, I was attacked, but—I do not

remember what happened. I remember only you, and you were so kind. If it is possible, I wish to stay here."

She said it all sweetly, almost demurely, and without passion, or intensity. It was like a well-learned lesson – and it was a lesson which she had carefully rehearsed. To Rollison, she became a different creature, not a terrified girl but a scheming woman who would rely upon her beauty and her helplessness to make him grant her wish. "How," she seemed to say, "could such a gallant turn me away?"

"You want to stay," mused Rollison, "because you are frightened?"

"Yes!"

"Why are you frightened?"

The nurse walked to the window and looked out. Someone moved about in the flat; Grice's man would soon lose patience. But he would have lost it already if Grice had not instructed him to allow Rollison to have his head.

"Why?" repeated Rollison, gently, and sat on the side of the bed and took her slim, pale hands. She had beautiful eyes, and they were shadowed; but he decided that it was not with fear, only with anxiety to gain his promise of sanctuary.

"I do not know," she said. "I do not remember, only that I was attacked. When I think of it, I am—afraid. I cannot tell you why. Please—allow me to stay."

Rollison said: "As long as you like."

"So she's French," the nurse said with tacit disapproval. "That's why she didn't say anything to me, she couldn't understand. You ought to have a nurse who speaks *French,* if there is such a thing."

"Not a bad idea," Rollison said. He looked at the girl, so hopeful and so beautiful, and said: "But don't try to tell her so, will you?" He slipped the next question in: "What is your name, mam'selle?"

She said: "I do not remember."

"Don't you?" asked Rollison softly. "Do you know Lady Murren, by any chance?"

Terror flared up in the girl's eyes, but she did riot-answer. Nothing he said made her explain that sudden surge of fear.

Rollison finished his breakfast, and glanced through *The Times,* without a great deal of interest. He had one ear cocked for the visit of Peter Latimer, of the *Record,* the other for a sound from the spare room. Grice's man, whom he knew slightly and who confessed to be able to speak French fluently, had gone in nearly an hour ago. There had been a murmur of conversation for a while, then silence. Jolly had asked no questions, save about Rollison's shoulder, which he had rubbed again with embrocation; it felt hot and uncomfortable but not painful. The sun shone brightly in at the window, but frost sparkled on the shadowy parts of the roofs of the houses opposite.

Jolly came in. "May I clear, sir?"

"Soon. Jolly."

"Is there anything I can do, sir?"

“Advise me. The young lady declares that she has lost her memory.”

“Indeed, sir. And do you believe her?”

“No.”

“On what subject do you want my advice?” murmured Jolly.

“What to do with her. She pleads to stay here. Grice probably won’t object. He hasn’t a real excuse for leaving a man here, he’s had the statement, such as it is. Mason and a thousand doctors would admit that amnesia could follow the shock and injury. Are we to let her stay, or give her marching orders?”

“Hoping that in desperation at the thought of going, that she would talk freely?”

“Yes.”

Jolly considered.

“If she is set on maintaining a pretence of loss of memory, sir, then she will probably be adamant. Sending her away might frighten but not persuade her. She would not wish to stay unless she felt secure here. I imagine she will be more likely to talk if she has reason for gratitude. I should allow her to stay, until you have seen Madame Thysson. There will be little inconvenience here, and if necessary a bed can be put up in the spare room, for a nurse. I think she is more likely to give you the information you want if you let her have her own way than if you try any form of shock tactics.”

“The oracle has spoken. Then we want another nurse. One who speaks French like a native, but will pretend to our guest that she only speaks English.”

“I will arrange it,” promised Jolly, and then turned, looking towards the hall. “I think Mr. Latimer is on the way. Will you see him at once?”

“Yes.”

Rollison got up from the table.

The little dining-alcove was curtained off from the main room, and he was there when Latimer came in. Latimer was a small, wiry-looking man of thirty with intelligent green-grey eyes, a long and somewhat wriggly nose, full lips and a Punch of a chin; he had a droll look. He was one of the brightest men on the Street, but his reputation had not spoiled him. Crime was his strong suit; and recently he had written a series of articles on the “Underworld “of Paris for his paper.

“Hallo, Rolly.” They shook hands. “What’s all the mystery?”

“Unknown French girl with lost memory, unknown Frenchman on a charge of attempted murder this morning, help wanted from a man who can give me all the latest news from Paris.”

Latimer rubbed the side of his nose.

“So it’s that job. I knew there was a Frenchman up, but had no idea you were behind it. What exactly do you want to know?”

“All you can tell me about a Madame Thysson,” said Rollison casually.

The droll look faded from Latimer’s eyes. The whole character of his face changed. It was suddenly possible to sense the strength of character in him,

to understand why he was one of the stars of Fleet Street.

He sat on the arm of a chair.

"Well, well," he said. "You do pick 'em, don't you? Madame Thysson is—but there could be two Madame Thyssons, I suppose. What's this one done?"

"My protégée mentioned her name last night, and this morning seemed to have forgotten all about her. Don't ask me why." Rollison moved across to the trophy wall and, as if by chance, touched the hangman's rope. He held it between his fingers and toyed with it. "What's yours done to make herself infamous?"

Latimer chuckled.

"Infamous is right! It would be nice irony if you managed to do what the *Sûreté* has failed to do, wouldn't it? Listen …"

Chapter Six

Of Madame Thysson

Latimer could talk as well as he could write.

Rollison sat back in his easy-chair and listened; the room seemed to fade, and he was transported across the Channel, across France and to Paris. Through the Paris scene there walked – or stalked – this Madame Thysson. She was credited with having a finger in every unsavoury pie baked in the most unsavoury districts of the gay City. She was at once feared and hated, loved and admired. A minority refused to believe that she was guilty of any of the crimes laid at her door; the police had never been able to make a charge against her. She was said to rule as an uncrowned Queen over much of Paris theatreland, over the night clubs, over the gaming-rooms, over the dress salons; everywhere. She was believed to be fabulously wealthy. If her enemies were right, she had moved from the Black Market when its heyday was past, to every manifestation of vice and crime. She played no personal part in it, simply shared the huge profits.

If one had stolen jewellery on one's hands, it was said that Madame Thysson would buy it, or have it bought; wasn't she the owner of three of the most exclusive jewellers in the Place de Vendôme? If one had a consignment of costly furs unexpectedly on one's hands, and separated from their legal owner, one might be advised to consult Madame Thysson; didn't she own two of the finest fur salons in Paris? If one wanted a false passport, Madame Thysson – or one of her cronies – would provide it, at a price. If there was a price on one's head and one wanted to hide, Madame Thysson could provide the hiding-place. If one had a charming friend anxious to obtain a part on the stage or at a night club, well – at a price, Madame Thysson would arrange it. She was a kind of universal provider, and there was nothing she could not dispense.

Latimer lost himself in his tale.

"I wanted to write about her, but it was too dangerous. She's a fantastic creature, according to report."

"Didn't you try to see her?"

Latimer laughed.

"I wanted to write up Paris from the inside, didn't I? Who else could give me all the dope? But I didn't see her in person, although I got what I wanted."

"At a price?"

"The price of friendly publicity," said Latimer, "and recommendations to her different business houses. She's a kind of modern Midas, and no fool; she keeps on good terms with the Press, home or abroad. Oddly, I didn't dislike her *aide."*

"What's she like herself?"

"Why not try to see for yourself? Few people do see her, and I'm told she wears a mask when she gives an audience." Latimer looked thoughtful. "I could arrange to flip over for a few days—like me to try to introduce you?"

"I would," said Rollison.

"Provided she's your Madame Thysson."

"Would she be likely to have authority over my unknown lovely?"

"You bet she would," said Latimer. "She keeps the sweetest lovelies on a kind of leash. Uses them as mannequins, for the night clubs and for less savoury purposes, if we can believe all we hear. She rules them with a rod of iron, too. Outwardly, there's nothing to criticise about Madame Thysson, her girls are respectable unless it's their job not to be respectable. Whatever she does, she does well. She is even renowned for her gifts to charity. Have I whetted your appetite?"

Rollison chuckled.

"Can you leave for Paris this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"You fix the seats, will you?"

"Yes," said Latimer, and stood up. "What about my price?"

"What do you want?"

"As much of the London story as you can give me."

"Why not stick to the known facts, and wait for the rest?" suggested Rollison. "I can't give you much more than the Yard will release. I gave them Madame Thysson's name, and Grice won't be long catching up with this job. He's probably in touch with the *Sûreté* by now. You scoop, as soon as you've helped to make a scoop."

"It would be worth it, to see you in action with Madame," said Latimer;, and laughed as if that were the joke of the week.

"Here's something not so funny," said Rollison. "Lady Murren was murdered last night. Any off-the-record news about that?"

"Why?"

"She was often in Paris, and her husband was quite a personage over there."

"Now what are you up to?" Latimer frowned. "I don't know about off the record. She was killed sometime before midnight. The police seem completely foxed. It's true she was often in France. What made you pick on her?"

"I'm only guessing," Rollison said hastily.

"I wonder. You've an uncanny nose, haven't you? Lady Murren was a friend of another odd character in Paris—a man known as the Count. His real name's de Vignon. He's murky—no one has a good word to say for him. I couldn't get anywhere near the man, but I picked up a few odds and ends, including the fact that he was friendly with a titled Englishwoman. One guess."

"I've guessed."

"I wondered then why Lady Murren should have anything to do with an unsavoury blackguard," said Latimer. "I still wonder."

"It's odd—a murderous Frenchman roams London and a woman well known in Paris gets murdered; de Vignon and Madame Thysson are also acquainted, I take it."

"De Vignon's said to foam at the mouth at the very mention of her name."

"The Count's another good reason for going to Paris," Rollison mused.

Latimer shrugged, and went off.

Grice did not disclose his private opinion of the genuineness of the girl's loss of memory, but outwardly accepted it. His man was withdrawn, by midday. The nurse was replaced by a tall, angular woman whose French made Rollison feel as if he were back at school. She had worked for him before, and was wholly trustworthy. The girl with no name seemed content to lie in bed, apparently sleeping most of the time. Rollison saw her twice, again ; and the shadow of fear was certainly gone from her eyes. She was pale and still tired, but not seriously ill.

Latimer telephoned; they were to leave London at four o'clock.

At a quarter to three, Rollison drove from Gresham Terrace to Scotland Yard in his Lagonda, which had been returned by one of Bill Ebbutt's men. Bill had sent a message that he didn't know for certain, but believed that Downing had been to Paris a great deal lately, although the name he travelled under wasn't Downing. The house near Brill Street was empty; Downing had lived there with a middle-aged housekeeper, who had also disappeared.

A policeman at the gates of the Yard saluted, another at the top of the steps greeted Rollison with a smile, and said that he had half expected to see him and, yes, he could go straight up. Grice was sitting in his large office, overlooking the Embankment. The sun still shone, and made the sluggish Thames look bright. There were two desks in the room, but only Grice's was occupied. He stood up, and waved to a chair.

"Come to confess?" he demanded.

"Yes. I'm going to borrow French currency from a friend of mine who can get as much as he likes."

Grice smiled faintly. "I thought you'd soon be on your way to Paris. After Madame Thysson?"

"Any crumbs from your table about her?"

"Latimer can give you the whole loaf."

Rollison chuckled.

"There are times when you're more than just average, Bill! So I'm being watched."

"You're not. Your flat is—we want to make sure that Downing or one of his friends doesn't have another go at the girl."

"Any idea who she is?"

"No. The *Sûreté* is going to send us a list of missing girls. They've already sent us a dossier on Madame Thysson, and you'd better watch your step."

"Downing?" asked Rollison.

"There isn't a clue," said Grice, and frowned. "But last week one of our

fellows was in Paris, and fancied he saw Downing at a café on the Boulevard de la Madeleine. The man got up and hurried away before he could make sure—which suggests he might have been Downing. Officially, he hasn't been to Paris. In fact, officially—" Grice paused.

"He's on his ticket and has to show up daily. Or has he got down to weekly?"

"Daily. I'm checking at the Division," Grice said.

"Not bad," murmured Rollison. "Downing gets a stooge to come and show his ticket, and the stooge is sufficiently like Downing to get away with it. It's the right time of the year, you can get away with a lot in electric light."

"We aren't certain, yet."

"You could try to find out what name Downing uses when he goes to Paris," Rollison said amiably.

Outside, traffic rumbled past along the Embankment, and a car horn hooted, sudden and strident.

"The car they used?" Rollison asked.

"Hired from a garage yesterday afternoon—by a man whose description doesn't tally with Downing's. We're trying to trace him; it was probably the third man at Brill Street."

"You're very helpful," murmured Rollison. "You almost make me think you hope I'll get results. What happened in court this morning?"

"There was a formal hearing, all over in two minutes," said Grice. "It's only the third time in my twenty years here that I've had to charge a man without being able to tie a label on to him. If you really mean, has the Frenchman talked—no. He's frightened, but he won't say a word. We've tried him with an interpreter, but no luck." Grice picked up a photograph from his desk, and tossed it across. "That's not bad, is it?"

Rollison studied the weak but handsome face, and wondered what had given this man sufficient strength to defy the police; and wondered, also, what persuasion would be needed to make him tell his story. Silence had fallen like a cloak upon both of the two French people involved. In both, it was inspired by fear – probably by fear of the consequences of talking freely to the police or to anyone else.

"Can you spare one of these?"

"They've been circulated to the Press, so why not?" said Grice. "I'm going to send a man over to take a photograph of your guest. And it's no use saying we can't, because—"

"Don't trouble," said Rollison. "Jolly took some this morning; they'll be ready when I get back. How many copies would you like?"

"A negative."

"I'll ask Jolly to oblige," said Rollison. "By the way—Lady Murren. Or is that a professional secret?"

Grice looked at him owlishly.

"Putting two and two together?"

"Two odd things connected with Paris, yes."

"We haven't a clue," Grice confessed. "Have you?"

"Only curiosity," said Rollison.

He left, twenty minutes after he had entered Grice's office, and still had three-quarters of an hour before he needed to get to the B.E.A. Departure Station in Kensington. He was to meet Latimer there. He drove to Gresham Terrace, and saw Grice's man in a doorway halfway along the street.

There had been no messages, but Dr. Mason had been in again and was fully satisfied with the girl's progress.

Rollison felt as if he were in a state of suspended animation. The swift sequence of events the previous night had faded into inaction which didn't seem real. There were other unlikely factors. Grice was being surprisingly affable, and laying down the law with a much lighter hand than usual. That wasn't because Grice thought it good tactics; in his official approach, Grice followed the instructions from the Powers That Be at Scotland Yard, and those instructions had obviously been to soft-pedal with Rollison. Had there been any objection to his flying to Paris, they would have made it clear; in fact, they were glad he was going.

One thing was reasonably certain; Grice knew much more about Madame Thysson than he had said.

Rollison tapped on the door of the spare room, and the angular nurse called: "Come in." The girl was sitting up and looking through a French copy of *Vogue;* doubtless Jolly had obtained it for her. She smiled, fleetingly, almost blankly; but Rollison was quite convinced that her blank expression was assumed; like the loss of memory.

"How are you?"

"So very comfortable and grateful," she said. "I feel as if I am at rest for the first time. Some thing terrible must have happened, and now—"

She broke off.

"Nothing terrible will happen," Rollison said. "I'm going away for a day or two, and—"

"No!" she cried. "No, you must not go away, you must not!"

The mask dropped away. She was natural again – and fear-stricken. She dropped the *Vogue,* and it fell noisily to the floor. She stretched out her hands, as if in supplication, and he hated the look in her eyes.

"You must not—not leave me. Please, unless you are here, I am so frightened."

She *was* frightened.

He said: "I must go, my dear. I shall be back in two or three days; you've nothing to worry about. You needn't go out of the flat until I'm back."

She whispered: "You—should—not—go."

And there was terror in her eyes; not because he was leaving her, but because she sensed where he was going and was afraid of what he would find out; or else of what would happen to him.

She sat erect, hands stretched out pleadingly, and trembling; and her eyes were huge.

Chapter Seven

Second Sight?

Rollison took her hands; they were icy cold and gripped his tightly. The girl seemed to put her very soul into the appeal.

"*Please*—do not go."

"Why not?"

"There will be danger for you."

"What makes you think so?"

"You should not go to Paris."

"Who said that I was going there?"

She closed her eyes; it was as if a powerful light had been switched off. Her hands went limp, and she drew them away slowly. Without opening her eyes, she said: "I know that you are going to Paris and that you will be in grave danger. *I know."*

*"*So you remember Paris," Rollison said.

"Oh, yes, I remember Paris."

"What else do you remember?"

"That you have been good to me, and I do not wish you to be hurt."

"What makes you think I might be?"

"The danger is everywhere," she said, "but mostly in Paris. You are foolish to go."

She dropped back on to her pillows, tacitly giving up hope that he would listen to her. She didn't speak again, and didn't open her eyes. He went outside, and brushed his hand across his forehead; it was slightly damp. The interview had been curiously affecting, almost unnerving. He laughed at himself, and moved to his desk, bent down and unlocked a bottom drawer. He took out an automatic pistol, a spare clip of ammunition and a fat knife which had a dozen blades and gadgets.

Jolly came in, and watched him.

"I think I'll take a stick, Jolly."

"I think you are wise," said Jolly mildly. "I will get one. Your case is packed, I have put in everything that you are likely to need."

He spoke like a fond aunt, and went out as the nurse came in.

There was a forbidding expression on her angular face. Her large red nose was shiny, but this failed to make her look ridiculous.

"Mr. Rollison."

"Yes?"

"There's something queer about that girl."

"So you felt it, too?"

"If I were going to Paris—" the nurse hesitated. *"Is* that where you're going?"

"Yes. And it would be anybody's first guess. Don't let her fool you, nurse.

She might be very innocent, but she could be full of cunning. I don't believe she has lost her memory; part of your job is to find out if she lets anything slip to prove she's lying."

"She hasn't said anything that matters, but that's probably because she doesn't know I speak French. If you ask me—"

"Yes?"

"I'd have a second opinion," the nurse said. "I don't care what anybody says, that woman isn't normal."

"You could be right," murmured Rollison. He went straight to the telephone. "I'll fix it."

He had only five minutes to spare before leaving for Kensington, and was listening to the *brr-brr* from Dr. Mason's number when Jolly came in again, carrying the stick and an envelope. It was a handsome, gold-topped walking-stick, with a top which could cause a nasty injury if used as a weapon.

A woman answered. Dr. Mason was engaged.

"Tell him this is urgent, please," Rollison said. "Richard Rollison speaking." He waited, and Jolly opened the envelope and showed three photographs of the girl, taken from different angles; and one of them was a work of art, for Jolly had removed the bandages on it, and sketched in her hair; it made an astonishing difference to her appearance. "Good," said Rollison. "Very good, in fact. Grice wants a negative. Grice is to have practically everything he says he wants, while I'm away. Messages to the *Hôtel Rivoli* … Hallo, Mason, sorry to drag you from your forty winks … Weren't you, really? … It's the girl. The nurse thinks that she's a bit odd … Call it fey, or second sight … Can you find a specialist who speaks French; the ostensible reason being that she says she's lost her memory."

"Well, that could happen," Mason said. "I'll have another look at her myself and get another opinion if it seems necessary. My French will serve."

By the time Rollison had finished, Jolly already had the front door open, and was standing with a large suitcase, a small pigskin valise and the walking-stick. Rollison took his hat and gloves and struggled into his overcoat as he went downstairs.

A taxi was waiting.

"Safe journey, sir," murmured Jolly.

"Hold the old fort, Jolly!" Rollison beamed and looked inane, a little over-dressed and almost foppish; the stick helped with that. He sank back in the corner of the cab and lit a cigarette, but before they had turned out of Gresham Terrace he was looking out of the back window. He saw no one except Jolly, who waited until he had turned the corner; Grice's man was out of sight.

Rollison glanced left, as they went towards Piccadilly.

A small black saloon-car, with a girl at the wheel, moved off from the side street; no one else followed. Rollison smoked and closed his eyes and recalled the effect of the French girl's condition on the nurse; whatever one might think about his own attitude of mind, the nurse was completely objective, and she could hardly have been more emphatic.

The taxi driver knew the short cuts to Kensington.

So did the girl in the small car.

Latimer, standing by the back door of the office, where an Airways bus was waiting, shook his fist as Rollison hurried in. A steward brought in his cases, and Latimer had his ticket. Rollison weighed his luggage in, attended to all the formalities and moved off with Latimer.

"I thought you'd backed out," Latimer said.

"Not until it gets dangerous! I'll hold the bus up for thirty seconds, you go and see if a Morris Eight, registration number 8BU154, is still outside, and if the girl driver is alone. Please."

Latimer moved off without a word. Rollison took his seat in the bus, and an attendant damned Latimer under his breath. He wasn't gone for long, and soon slid into the seat next to Rollison. There was plenty of room.

"The car's there, the girl isn't."

"Gone to telephone," Rollison commented.

"So you were watched."

"Well, it could be someone after my autograph. On the other hand, we shall need eyes at the backs of our heads when we get to the airport."

"You'll give me the willies, soon," said Latimer.

There was an air of bustle at the airport, and eagerness to cut short the Customs and the passport formalities. There were fifteen passengers, mostly men; only two had been waiting at the airport. Rollison finished with the authorities, and studied the passengers and officials. He picked out a tall, heavily built man who appeared to have nothing in particular to do, and strolled across to him.

"Good morning, sir."

"Not unknown at Scotland Yard, are you?" murmured Rollison.

The other smiled.

"No, Mr. Rollison."

"You couldn't be here to watch me, could you?"

"I could be, but I'm not. Just general duty."

"Good. There were two people waiting for the 'plane when we arrived—notice them?"

"Yes."

"Either of them book his ticket at the last minute, do you know?"

"I can find out," said the Yard man. "I'll send you a message at the 'plane." He glanced at the two passengers who were standing by the steps leading to the aircraft; one was noticeably taller than the other. "We'll call the tall one A and the other B—I'd better look slippy, or I shan't find out before you leave."

He moved away, and Latimer came across, looking suspicious.

"Now what?"

"Restless mind," said Rollison.

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't come," Latimer said, but he grinned. "Not expecting fireworks on the 'plane, are you?"

Heaven forbid! I hate sea-water in the winter."

Latimer chuckled.

They settled down in their seats, side by side. The taller of the two men who had roused Rollison's interest was immediately in front of Latimer, the other nearer the front of the cabin. There was comfort amounting to luxury. The engines were still warming up, but there was greater hustle, and men came forward to remove the chocks from the wheels, The stewardess talked to a woman with a child in her arms, and who seemed nervous. There was no sign of the Yard man. A steward came out from the airport buildings and spoke to one of the crew, who climbed up into the 'plane.

A loudspeaker gave voice pleasantly.

"Fasten your belts, please, and may I remind all passengers that there must be no smoking until further notice."

"Someone let you down?" asked Latimer. "Either that, or no news is good news," said Rollison.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. The machine taxied, quickly gathering speed, and suddenly the slight bumping sensation ceased, and they were airborne. The stewardess knelt by the side of the woman, making faces at the baby. Rollison kept his eyes closed. Latimer rustled newspapers. The stewardess left her charge and came along the gangway offering newspapers and giving each passenger a form.

"Fill that out, please; it's the Customs Declaration, and you'll need it as soon as we land."

She leaned across and touched Rollison's shoulder.

He opened his eyes.

"Hallo."

"Here is your form, Mr. Rollison." She handed him a slip of paper as well as the form, and when he unfolded it, he saw the single letter *"A"*.

So the man in front of him had bought his ticket at the last minute; possibly as a result of a telephone call from the girl in the Morris Eight.

It was dark when they reached Le Bourget. They made a good landing, and the airport staff promptly surged round the machine. Rollison gripped Latimer's arm, and they hurried to the buildings, reaching the main offices first. The tall man was some way behind.

"What's eating you?" demanded Latimer testily.

"I don't know, yet. Remember the tall chap who sat in front of us?"

"Broad nose, broad face, oozes money, could be a Slav?"

"He could be a friend of Madame Thysson's, too. We'll take a different taxis, and you come behind me, just to check whether I'm being followed. Any objection?"

"I wish I'd brought a gun," Latimer said.

The Customs Officers were affable and did not appear to be thorough. Rollison was first out of the room and first into a taxi; it may have been chance that the man who could have been a Slav was immediately behind him. A private car was waiting for this passenger, and stood out among the

motley collection of Renaults and Citroens of all shapes, sizes and stages of dilapidation. It was a powerful Buick, glistening in the bright lighting just outside the airport building. Rollison's taxi was an old Renault, the driver plump and unshaven. Latimer had the fifth taxi, and neither of them had the speed of the Buick. If the car went ahead, there was a fair chance that the man who had got into it was not interested in Rollison.

He was tall and massive, wearing a thick overcoat, a scarf and a black Homburg hat. He wore American-type rimless glasses, and had little luggage; Big Business, to the last word. He could have started ahead of Rollison, but chose not to, and the Buick slid after Rollison's taxi. Latimer came soon afterwards ; he had been luckier with his cab, which was small but new.

Half a mile along the road the Buick purred past Rollison. One moment the inside of the taxi was bright from its headlights, the next darkness fell upon him, and the red light grew rapidly smaller. Rollison hardly knew whether to be pleased or sorry. He sat back so that he could see out comfortably, half-prepared to find the Buick drawn up at the side of the road. It wasn't. They were now in a built-up area in what appeared to be a squalid part of Paris, and there were few lights.

The Buick had disappeared.

"Well, it was worth trying," Rollison mused, and looked through the back window. Several cars were in sight, and he couldn't pick out Latimer's. He yawned again, and the vision of the broad-faced business man faded. The engine was noisy, and the car rattled; the driver drove as if his life depended on reaching the heart of Paris in the shortest possible time.

Rollison dozed—

Then something smacked against a window with a sharp report. Instinctively, he drew back his head. He couldn't see what had happened, but his right hand moved towards his pocket, for the gun. As he touched it there was a loud report, and the taxi skidded and went out of control. It swerved, and then leapt towards a wall which loomed up out of the darkness.

Chapter Eight

Warm Welcome

The front wheels hit a kerb; Rollison was thrown back and bumped his head against the rear window. He heard a rending sound. Then the car skidded again as the driver tried to regain control. The nearside wing scraped along the wall, there was another bump, and the car lurched to one side; as if it were turning turtle. Rollison hadn't time to think or act, but instinctively kept his head low. There was another crash, but the taxi had steadied and was on all four wheels. It rocked to a standstill. The driver sat quite still, as if he couldn't believe that the emergency was over.

Rollison didn't try to get up.

He'd bruised his head and his knees, and his shoulder hurt more, but he stayed where he was. After the din of the crash, everything seemed quiet with a deathly hush. Then other taxis passed, two of them going at a mad speed. Another slowed down; so did a second and a third. Doors slammed, and men began to talk. One thrust his head in at the driver's window, and began to speak in rapid French. A face appeared at a window near Rollison's; he couldn't be sure who it was, but he thought that it was Latimer.

It was. The door opened, and Latimer snapped: "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Pretend no."

Rollison whispered, and wondered whether the words were heard above excited comments of the men in front. His driver had recovered, and was colouring the air with his opinions. Two or three other drivers had gathered near him, and listened in respectful silence.

Latimer leaned in; the only one, so far, who had worried about the passenger.

"Pretend what?"

"That I've been hurt. Have them take me to a hospital—right in Paris, preferably. Be British, insist loudly, never mind whether they want to fetch a doctor first. I'm going to look half-dead."

"*Are you?"*

"Not yet."

An American asked: "Is anyone hurt?"

Latimer backed out and began to talk quickly, in bastard French with a few words of English. The American looked in, and saw Rollison huddled in his corner with his eyes closed. Two people began to move him, and the American said: "You ought to send for a doctor."

"Get him to hospital!" cried Latimer. "Driver, hurry—use my taxi. *Hurry*."

"He looks pretty bad," the American said.

"He's unconscious, might have cracked his skull." Latimer was doing well, almost too well; he sounded nearly hysterical. But it worked. Rollison was

carried out of the taxi and into another, handled as if he were made of delicate porcelain. He didn't move of his own accord, and let his head loll back. It seemed a long time before the second taxi moved off.

Latimer was in front, for he spoke to the driver. Rollison eased his position, and through his lashes looked at the little crowd now gathered round his first taxi. Most of them seemed to be taxi-drivers, and they broke up and went towards their own cabs; a line of seven or eight was strung out along the road.

This taxi went more smoothly, with less rattling but at considerable speed. Latimer kept urging the driver to hurry, until Rollison felt nervous qualms. Before long, a cacophony of shrill horns, police whistles and throbbing engines told him that they were in thick traffic. Twice they passed through a quiet street and then they swung left and pulled up. In five minutes he was on a stretcher and being carried into a hospital.

Latimer contrived to be left alone with Rollison as soon as they were in the Casualty Room. Rollison was still on the stretcher, which had been placed on stands. A dim light shone.

"Now what?" Latimer asked.

Rollison sat up.

"Nothing broken, so we've something to be thankful for. How much did you learn?"

"You were shot at—one bullet hit a tyre and it burst. Your luck was in, most drivers would have crashed pretty badly. I gave your man my name, he'll be after you for compensation, but—"

"We'll refer him to Madame Thysson, in due course," said Rollison. "Could it have been the Slav, I wonder? That would fit in. If he rushed ahead, conferred with his gunmen and told them what cab to attack, we needn't ask ourselves any more questions. Feeling cheerful?"

Latimer said: "Within an hour you've discovered more about the active side of the crime life of Paris than I did in a month."

"It's hypnotic influence," Rollison said.

He broke off, as the door opened and a middle-aged nurse and a young doctor came in, both dressed in white. Rollison beamed at them. The startled nurse raised her hands, and the doctor frowned. Rollison climbed off the bed, and spoke easily: "I was lucky, wasn't I? Will you make sure there's nothing broken?"

The doctor's frown changed to a smile.

"Immediately!"

He beckoned the nurse, and as they probed and prodded, Rollison talked briskly. It was, of course, impossible, but could a report be spread about that he was seriously hurt? That was, to anyone who inquired and, perhaps, to the newspapers. He had enemies, it would be better if they believed that he would be in the hospital for some time … Yes he would gladly see a police-officer before he left, would as gladly make a handsome contribution to the funds of the hospital, if the little deception could be practised. There were

doubtless many difficulties, but …

Difficulties, said the doctor, were made to be overcome.

An hour later, Rollison left by a side door of the hospital and got into a taxi. Instead of going to the *Rivoli,* where Jolly would have reserved a room by now, he went to a small hotel near the Champs-Élysées, recommended by the amiable doctor. It was called the *Mulle.* He booked in, surrendered his passport for formalities, and was taken up in an open lift to the third floor. The room was a large one, well furnished with white-and-gilt furniture, and had its own bathroom. He locked the door after the porter had delivered his luggage, and for the first time since he had reached Paris, felt that he could relax.

That didn't last long, for the telephone bell rang.

Only Latimer and the hospital authorities should know where he was.

He lifted the telephone.

"M'sieu Rollison? Will you speak to M'sieu Latimer?"

"Yes, thanks."

Latimer said: "So you're there all right."

"And no more fireworks," said Rollison. "Were you followed to the *Rivoli?"*

"I don't know, but I'm afraid so. How did you get on with the police?"

"No complaints. They've heard of Superintendent Grice, and I gave him for a reference. I hope you can call on plenty of money over here. I've promised the hospital twenty-five thousand francs."

"Twenty-five pounds! You find life expensive, don't you?"

"It's surprising how money comes along," murmured Rollison. "Pete, how well do you really know Madame Thysson's friends?"

"I don't know," said Latimer. "I could have fixed an introduction to her chief *aide,* but if she's behind this, do you want her to know you're up and about?"

"Not yet. But if you went to see her or the *aide,* and talked angrily about what happened to your friend Rollison, and told her a little about him, and suggested that if she has any influence with the police, she will make sure that the villains were apprehended, it might be a help. You could give me a build-up, the lady a smile, and you might also find out if the Slav is a friend of hers. If he is, he's probably seen her by now."

"Not likely; at most he'd send a message. I can fix all that, I think. What will you do?"

"Stay here, eat and drink, and count my blessings," said Rollison. "Then if you could find out when Madame Thysson will be somewhere more or less alone, I could look in later. Shock tactics are indicated, I think."

"You have made your will, I suppose?"

"I'm heavily insured, too. But don't gloom, Pete. This is the gay city. When in Paris, do as the Parisians do. I'm going to have a good time and throw money about like water—that's if you can draw on plenty for expenses."

"On a story like this, I can fix it," said Latimer. "Don't think I'm backing

out, but *is* this a job you can tackle on your own?"

"No. I need the help of Fleet Street's most renowned crime reporter."

"The thing is," said Latimer, "I haven't made a will. I'll ring you when there's any news."

Rollison ordered a meal with a thoroughness which won the respectful approval of the waiter, gave precise orders as to the time he wanted to start eating, and had a hot bath to fend off the worst of the stiffness which was already beginning to make itself felt. Over his trousers and shirt he put a silk dressing-gown which had been embroidered with lilies of the valley by a loving aunt, and was ready when a *pâté* arrived. He spent an hour and five minutes over the meal, and sat back in an easy-chair with cognac and coffee for company. The *Hôtel Mulle* was a find; there were few better chefs in Paris, so where to eat was no problem.

What to do now? He let thoughts trickle through his mind, and even spent a little time reconstructing what had happened and trying to see the motive for all this.

And he thought of the girl with "second sight".

He had come to Paris to find out her identity; and Downing and his friends realised that. But why go to these lengths to stop him? They knew that the police were already involved, that Scotland Yard had, by now, asked for help from the *Sûreté Générale.* Downing was no fool, Madame Thysson even less of a fool, and she wasn't likely to be surrounded by blockheads. Everyone concerned, then, must know that by the morning at the latest, the *Sûcreté* would have a photograph of the girl, and would be making attempts to trace her. Sooner or later, they would; probably they would identify her before Rollison did, so – no one in their senses would have attacked Rollison simply to prevent him identifying the girl.

Then – why attack?

They would not take such a chance merely to stop him from interfering; for he had not yet shown any sign that he could be a serious threat to their organisation in Paris. He might threaten nuisance value, but nuisance value hardly justified an attack on the road which would start the police buzzing. A discreet attack might have been meant as a warning, but they wouldn't use as warning, methods which would set the police agog. They'd meant to kill.

Why?

Possibly because they believed the girl had talked to him, and told him something of significance. But they – this nebulous "they" – had no guarantee that she hadn't already talked to the London police.

He had seen both the girl and the silent Frenchman; but so had the police. "They" would certainly not attack him for the sake of it, and they would know that it would quicken the interest of the London police.

He let the thoughts sift through his mind idly, and felt a warm sense of well-being; he had eaten well, he had come through the worst safely, and – he was enjoying himself.

He smiled faintly into a gilt mirror.

Why pick him out for such an attack? Why go to the trouble of finding out whether he had left for Paris, of having him followed and so warmly received? There was another question; the shadowing had been done brilliantly. Was he wise to assume that he had fooled anyone by the visit to the hospital? He had not noticed anyone following his taxi, but the rear window had been small and there had been a lot of traffic. Unless he credited Downing's friends with exceptional cleverness, he would walk into more trouble.

He was still sitting there when a knock came at his door.

Latimer? Surely Latimer would have the sense not to come in person.

A man from the *Sûreté?* That was much more likely.

He got up, as the knock was repeated, took the automatic pistol from his coat pocket, slipped it into his dressing-gown pocket and kept his fingers round the handle. Then he approached the door. There was a narrow foyer, and the bathroom led off it; there wasn't much room to move.

He turned the key as the knocking started again; the sound of metal on metal couldn't be heard above it. He stepped into the bathroom and half-closed the door, then called: "Come in!"

Whoever was outside had seen the door move slightly when Rollison unfastened the catch. It was already being pushed wider, with no attempt at concealment. He saw part of the narrow passage beyond, and then the girl. She was quite young and she appeared diffident; nervous.

He had never seen her before.

She said in English: "Where are you, please?"

Chapter Nine

Decoy

Rollison did not answer, but watched her. She pushed the door wider open, and he could see beyond her; no one else was there.

"Come in and close the door," he said.

She glanced towards the bathroom, hesitated only for a moment, and then stepped inside. She closed the door and stood still, looking into that part of the bathroom she could see.

"Go into the room," Rollison said.

She went in, moving with easy grace. She wore a tailor-made suit of a fawny brown colour, with a mink collar. She had a small brown hat, her makeup was superb, and she had legs worth looking at. She wore gloves, and carried a small handbag beneath her right arm. She obeyed him without a word, and didn't look round.

"Go to the mirror and look into it," Rollison ordered.

Again, she obeyed.

He stepped into the foyer, locked the door again, and let the gun go for the first time. It made a heavy weight in his pocket. The girl could see him in the mirror, but she didn't look round.

"Put your handbag on the table," Rollison said.

She obeyed.

"Stay where you are."

The astounding thing was that she accepted his orders without question, as if obedience were instinctive. She stared at him in the mirror, and he could see her lovely, oval face; her blue eyes were starry bright, she had a look of great innocence.

He patted the sides of her coat, and made sure that she had no gun there. She might have one rucked into her stocking; he patted her legs, but felt no lump. She didn't move or object.

"Turn round," he said.

She obeyed, and stared again because of his smile. He looked young, gay, amused.

"But how wonderful!" he said in French.

"There can't be many women in Paris who can hold a candle to you. Hold a candle—that makes sense?"

She nodded. "Of course."

Rollison picked up her bag and opened it; there was no gun, no weapon of any kind inside. Nor was there anything he might find of interest, no letters or papers. Lipstick, compact, tiny handkerchief, purse and a note-case filled with the thin French paper money, which looked a fortune but was less than five pounds in value. He closed the bag, and said: "What will you have to drink?"

"Thank you, nothing." She persisted in speaking English with a marked accent.

"Oh, that's too bad. Can't we be friends?"

"I am your friend," she said, and for the first time, showed some kind of feeling.

"Wonderful! Then you'll have …"

"Please, I will not drink," she said, and then saw the coffee-tray. "Perhaps —coffee?"

"Like a shot."

He switched to English, went across and lifted the telephone, ordering coffee and liqueurs. Then he went across to the girl and offered her a cigarette; she shook her head.

"*No* vices?" murmured Rollison.

"I do not understand. I have come to ask you to return to London."

"Oh, too bad! I was hoping—"

"It will be a mistake to remain here."

"Who said so?"

"I am telling you."

"How do you know?"

She said: "You talk so much, I do not understand you. I do not mean to injure you. I have come to warn you that it is not good for you in Paris. Already, you have been hurt. Perhaps you will be hurt again, and that will be worse. Please, be wise."

"Who sent you?"

"M'sieu le Comte."

"Oh," said Rollison blankly, but he thought of Latimer's talk of a man named de Vignon with a bad reputation. "The Count of Monte Crista?"

"This is not a joke," she rebuked him. "I shall not tell you the name of M'sieu le Comte, that is my order. I am to advise you to leave Paris."

"Will you come with me?"

She frowned. "I do not understand."

"If I go, will you come with me? I mean, make it worth my while?" His smile looked hopeful, eager.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, speaking as if this were a difficulty she hadn't expected to meet. "M'sieu le Comte did not suggest that, but perhaps he will approve. Where would you wish to take me?"

Rollison said: "Forget it. Who are you?"

"I am Mademoiselle Blanc."

"In English, Smith, I suppose."

She looked puzzled.

"Forget that, too. Did the Comte tell you what to say if I refused to leave Paris?"

"No."

"Does he expect me to go."

"He would not have sent me, to waste my time or yours," she said. "Please understand, it will be for everyone's good. M'sieu le Comte regrets

what happened on the road from Le Bourget. He has reason to believe that it could happen again, if you were to stay in Paris. He asks you to believe that you cannot hide, it was quickly known that you are in this hotel. This is not London. He told me to say, this is not your home ground."

"Not bad," said Rollison. "Why do you do what the Count tells you?"

"It is my duty to do what he tells me."

"Everything?"

"But of course."

The waiter came in, with coffee. Mademoiselle Blanc sat down, and allowed Rollison to pour out; she chose black coffee. She refused a cigarette again, and he remembered that there had been no cigarette-case in her bag. She sat quite erect, superbly beautiful – and empty? Everything she had said seemed to have been repeated, like a well-learned recitation, as if someone else were prompting her and she was only the vehicle for the words. She had not once smiled; he wondered what she would be like when she did.

"Where does the Count live?"

"I am not to tell you."

"Pity," said Rollison. "How many more beautiful young women work for him?"

"Many," said Mademoiselle Blanc simply.

Rollison gulped his coffee, and nearly choked.

"Well, you're honest about that if nothing else. I have some bad news for you."

"I do not understand."

"I am going to stay in Paris."

"No!" she cried, and he was astonished at the sudden passion; and reminded of the way the girl in his flat had pleaded with him not to leave London. She put down her coffee-cup abruptly, leaned forward and stretched out a hand, to touch his. "No, you must not stay here."

"I've a lot to do."

"It will be dangerous!"

"Danger soon passes."

"Not this," she said, "and not for you, M'sieu Rollison." She was still intent and put everything she could into her words. "To stay here will be a big mistake. You should be grateful to M'sieu le Comte for telling you of the danger. Go, please."

Rollison said: "You almost make me nervous."

He stopped smiling, jumped up and turned away; but he saw the girl in the mirror, and saw a smile. It was gone in a flash, but he hadn't imagined it; she thought that she was on the verge of success, and couldn't repress that quick smile of satisfaction. He moved across to the wardrobe, took out his coat and waistcoat, took off the dressing-gown and put the other things on. All the time the girl looked at him intently; her eyes reminded him of the girl at the flat.

"You are going?"

Rollison said abruptly, almost angrily: "I don't see why I should.

Confound it, no! I'm not going to be frightened away." He licked his lips; as nearly as Rollison could, he looked frightened. "Go and tell the Count I intend to stay here. I want to see him, here. If he can convince me that I ought to leave—" He broke off.

"I will tell M'sieu le Comte," she said, and although she didn't smile again, satisfaction sounded in her voice. "You will be wise to do what he advises." She got up quickly, picked up her handbag, and went towards the door; and as she passed him, she held out her hand. "It has been a pleasure to meet you."

Rollison said: "Has it?"

Then she smiled; and it dazzled him, as if it were intended to. She had seemed lovely before; now, she was radiant and ravishing. There was beauty and promise in her eyes, and she no longer looked young and innocent but worldly wise far beyond her years.

"I shall hope to see you again," she said, let his hand go, and went out. She reached the door before he could open it for her.

The door closed on the girl, and Rollison turned the key again. Then went to the telephone, without a pause, knowing exactly what he wanted to do. All pretence of nervousness and uncertainty had gone, there was a glow of pure enjoyment in his eyes.

He asked for the head porter, and was put through at once.

"M'sieu?"

"Do you want to earn a thousand francs?"

"How can I help?" The man's English was good, his eagerness obvious.

"A girl is about to leave the hotel—delay her. Don't say why, but find a way to delay her for three or four minutes. You can find an excuse."

"But, sir—"

Rollison hung up, grabbed his overcoat and put it on, put the stick under his arm and then went to get the gun. Within a minute of the girl leaving, he was at the door. He turned the key quietly and opened the door an inch, peering into the passage. He saw no one. He opened the door more widely, and stepped boldly outside, slamming the door. No other doors were open, and no one was about. He heard the whine of the lift, which was at the end of this passage. He hurried down the stairs and instead of going to the main hall, went into a room marked: *Service.* Two waiters and a maid looked up in surprise.

Rollison beamed.

"A way out, please—not the front way."

One man protested, another was quick on the uptake, and led the way through a small pantry, then across the kitchen, which was spotless, to a side door.

"Which way is the front entrance?" asked Rollison.

"*A droit, m'sieu."*

"Thanks." Five hundred francs changed hands, and Rollison stepped into the cold night air; it seemed colder here than in London, and the wind

struck at him as he reached the corner. He didn't turn it. The lights outside the hotel shone brightly, and no one came out. There was no waiting car. He stayed where he was for several minutes, beginning to fear that the head porter had failed him.

Then the girl appeared.

She turned and walked towards Rollison. He backed away. She passed without looking down the side street; and she moved quickly. He followed her, making little sound. She was heading for the Champs-Élysées, and within a few minutes turned along an unlit path, beneath the chestnut-trees. The headlights of cars, moving fast along the wide road, showed her in clear silhouette. Twice, Rollison glanced over his shoulder, and the girl also looked round. Rollison paused by a seat, looking behind him. There was no one else in sight; but he would take a lot of convincing that he wasn't being followed.

There was a pause in the stream of traffic, and the girl hurried across. She was nearer the Place de l'Étoile than the Place de la Concorde, and there were buildings on either side of the wide road. He crossed the main road, running to avoid a car; the horn blared out stridently, perhaps enough to warn the girl that someone else was in the road. She didn't seem to notice; and in Paris there was nothing remarkable in a car horn blaring without good reason.

Another lull in the traffic enabled him to pick out the sharp tap-tap-tap of her heels. She walked beneath the trees, then past a row of shops and cafés, most of the cafés open but without any chairs or tables outside. Next, she turned left.

He knew that there was a rabbit warren of streets on this side of the Champs-Élysées, it would be easy to lose her between here and the Seine. He ran as far as the corner, and a traffic gendarme, swinging his white baton, looked at him inquisitively. So did several people who were coming towards him. He ignored them and turned after the girl. She reached another corner, and turned left; he would have lost her, had he not run. When he reached the next street, he saw her beneath the light of a lamp. He was only just in time, for she turned into one of the doorways, and disappeared.

"Now I wonder if M'sieu le Comte could live in there," murmured Rollison. "And whether he'd like to see me."

Chapter Ten

The Toff Pays A Visit

Rollison walked briskly past the house into which the girl had gone. The door was closed, but the next one was open. This showed a narrow courtyard, with doorways on either side; typical French style. Almost immediately opposite was a *bistro,* where half a dozen men leaned, against the counter, drinking, and a few couples sat at shiny-topped tables. No one took any notice of Rollison, who went farther along and entered a large café. Here there were red-leather chairs, red-topped tables, an inner room with tables round the side, and everywhere, bottles of wine. The floor was covered with sawdust, the *patron* and his assistants were dressed in black, and were without exception plump.

He ordered a beer, and took it to a table near the door. From here he could see the entrance to the house where the girl had gone, and also along the street in each direction. Two couples, a gendarme, an old woman with a tiny dog on a long lead and three pig-tailed girls passed in quick succession. No one lingered, no one else called at the house in which he was interested.

There was a telephone in a corner of the café, an open box – but he was in a hurry. After he'd asked for the *Hôtel Rivoli,* there was a long wait. Two or three of the customers and the *patron* eyed him thoughtfully.

"*Rivoli,"* a girl said.

"Mr. Latimer," Rollison said.

"Please wait one moment."

One moment grew into many. More people passed the open doorway, but no one else came in. Then Latimer spoke quietly.

"Hallo?"

"Pete, get a pencil," Rollison said in English.

"Ready."

"Try to find out,who lives at 19 Rue de l'Arbre, near the Champs-Élysées on the river side," said Rollison. "Especially if there's anyone with a real or courtesy title of 'Count' or if it's associated with Madame in any way. Or even your pal de Vignon."

"Rue de l'Arbre—Number 19." Latimer was quick. "And then?"

"If you feel energetic, meet me at the corner of the Rue de l'Arbre, in an hour's time."

"Which corner?"

"Champs-Élysées," Rollison said.

He rang off, aware that in the café people were looking at him openly or covertly. He went to the door and glanced out. There was a spitting of rain in the air, and the ground was damp and greasy. A taxi tore past, endangering life and limb, and a dog scampered out of its path. Rollison looked both ways, but particularly towards Number 19. A man came out and

walked towards him; the man's face showed up in the café light, but Rollison had never seen him before. Rollison looked at his watch, as if impatiently, went across to a corner table from which he could see Number 19, and ordered another beer.

He had been there for a quarter of an hour when Sam Downing walked past and disappeared into the house.

Latimer stepped out of a taxi, a hundred yards away from the corner, and strolled briskly along. Rollison was in a doorway, and the newspaperman did not see him. No one followed Latimer, who went beyond the corner, so that he could not be seen from the Rue de l'Arbre. Rollison crossed the road and approached Latimer from behind.

"Looking for someone?"

Latimer, with his coat collar turned up against the thin rain, didn't turn round.

"I'm beginning to think you're worth your reputation."

"What have I done now?"

"M'sieu le Comte is de Vignon, and one of the more unpleasant rogues of Paris, as I've said. Number 19 is a kind of night club. Not a nice kind. There are worse, but—" Latimer shrugged and turned. "I've told you that M'sieu le Comte and Madame Thysson are not considered good friends."

"Know anything more about him?"

"The de Vignon family nearly died out under Madame Guillotine's orgies, but one branch survived. Why do the worst branches always seem to have the luck? He's an aristocrat by birth and a rogue by vocation. How did you get on to him?"

"He sent me a messenger. Any luck with Madame Thysson?"

"Luck is the word," said Latimer. "I'm assured that she will be at her flat tonight, on the Quai de Bayenne. Near the Quai de Béthune. Number Twelve."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," said Rollison.

"You'll soon find out. The next time I hear a shot I'm going to run like blazes. I felt safe until I allowed myself to bring you over here."

"Think of the headlines in prospect," encouraged Rollison. "I'm going to have a chat with M'sieu le Comte. I'd be a happier man if someone were nearby, with a taxi, ready to get me away if I'm driven out by the scourges. Of course, you could come inside with me, but we shouldn't have a taxi to get away in, should we?"

"We shall have a taxi," said Latimer firmly. "How long are you going to be?"

"If I'm not out in an hour and the police should come to investigate, I wouldn't object," said Rollison.

Latimer gave a strangled laugh. In the poor light, with the drizzle coming faster and cars swishing along the wet roads, there was an uneasy moment of waiting.

"Seriously," Latimer said, "if you want me inside, I'll come like a shot."

"I'd much rather you stayed outside."

"You know that you're asking for trouble, don't you? There's a nasty stratum in Paris, and this is it. You wouldn't be the first man to disappear without leaving a trace, if you were to interfere too much."

"I have been warned," said Rollison sepulchrally.

"And you can't call on your friends of the East End to get you out of the mess."

"Well," said Rollison, "the press is behind me." Latimer wasn't amused.

The door through which Mademoiselle Blanc had gone opened when Rollison turned the handle and pushed. That did not get him far. He stood in a small courtyard. A single electric lamp burned immediately ahead of him. There were two staircases, one on each side, leading to apartments – odd numbers one side, even numbers the other. A dark window had a word printed on it in white: *Concierge.* There were also cards with the names and addresses of the tenants, but there was no Comte de Vignon. There was one which read: *Club de l'Amour,* and the *appartement* was Number 6. Rollison went up the stone staircase leading to the even numbers. There was a light at the first landing, but none at the second. Above, a glimmer showed, as if at an open door. There was a sound of music, which seemed a long way off; hot, rhythmic stuff. The sound became louder as he went silently up the stairs.

At a half-landing, he could see Number 6. A door stood ajar, and the light came from that. He saw a shadow, probably that of a man who was sitting just inside the flat. He kept close to the wall, to lessen the risk of being seen, but the shadow moved as he approached. So he stepped boldly forward, and saw a small, vicious-looking man standing in front of a chair, and glaring at him. The fact that the man had on a dinner-jacket, with a wasp waist and absurdly exaggerated shoulders, did not make him look any less vicious. He put one hand to his pocket, and held the other in front of him, palm upwards.

"Good evening," said Rollison, in English.

"Your card," the man said.

"I left it behind," said Rollison, and went nearer. "M'sieu le Comte is expecting me."

Dark eyes surveyed him sceptically. The man spoke in French, mixing a few words of English; in effect, he said that M'sieu le Comte was expecting no one who hadn't a card which entitled him to enter the *appartement.*

Rollison said: "Oh, well," and took out his wallet. It was bulging with French notes, sufficient to distract the eye of the vicious man, who immediately relaxed. Rollison selected one of his own cards, and said: "Show him both sides."

"M'sieu?"

"Just show him," said Rollison.

"Wait here, please."

There was another door behind the man, who sat on guard in a little

cubby hole; there was just room for the chair and for visitors to pass to the second floor. He tapped three times, sharply, and after a lengthy pause, tapped again. A spy-hole in the door opened; it was well calculated to impress the naive. The door opened and the vicious-looking man disappeared.

Rollison was being watched; he couldn't see but sensed the eye at the spy-hole. He turned down his coat collar, and took off his hat, then lit a cigarette. The sound of music had stopped, but started again; there was dancing inside. The waiting lasted for several minutes, before the door opened and the little man appeared.

"Hallo!" greeted Rollison. "Not lost?"

"You may come." The words were uttered gratingly, and with dislike. Rollison beamed and followed him, but he was handed over immediately to another, taller man. The first went back to his post. This was an ante-room; through an open door he caught a glimpse of dancing, and he didn't like the glimpse; he preferred his dancers more décorously dressed. All that Latimer had told him about le Comte de Vignon promised to be true.

He was led through another room. Outside a far door, a big man sat back in an arm-chair; obviously a bodyguard. Rollison's escort tapped at the door, which was painted white, and a man said in a deep voice: "Come in, at once."

It was a large room, beautifully furnished in modern style; the décor was green and gold, the carpet was thick, there were portraits of nudes round the walls. Across one corner was a desk of black oak, intricately carved, and behind the desk sat the man whom he had last seen getting into the Buick; the Slav type.

The man smiled.

"Good evening, Mr. Rollison."

"Nice of you to see me," murmured Rollison.

"I—" He broke off, for the man who had brought him here suddenly grabbed his right arm and twisted it behind his back. A practised hand slapped his pockets, and the gun was pulled out, followed by the knife. The man let him go, and took the spoils across to the desk.

"A little precaution, and so necessary," said de Vignon. "Won't you take your coat off, Mr. Rollison?"

Rollison said: "Thanks."

He took off his coat and dropped it across a chair, propping the stick up by its side. The stick fell, he had to fiddle with it. The man who'd taken the gun went to the chair.

"No," said Rollison.

The man picked up the coat.

"I said *no,"* said Rollison. He went across, pulled the coat out of the man's hand, and added: "We don't want a rough-house yet, do we?"

"You are hardly in a position to start a rough-house now, Mr. Rollison." De Vignon's English was excellent if accented, and his smile charming.

"If he takes the coat away, you'll see," said Rollison.

De Vignon hesitated, then shrugged.

"Leave it, Leon. Wait outside."

The man obeyed as promptly as the girl had obeyed Rollison at his hotel. The door closed silently. De Vignon still held Rollison's card, and glanced down at it again.

"Do sit down, Mr. Rollison. I see you are quite an artist. What is this little drawing supposed to represent?"

"Oh, that. That strikes terror," said Rollison amiably. "Didn't you know?"

"I know you are out of your element in Paris."

"Really? A bullet kills in Paris as well as in London, and bad men go to prison in both places for more or less the same kind of thing. Of course, we hang the worst and you guillotine them, but I don't think that makes much difference in the long run. How's Mademoiselle Blanc?"

"Charming and beautiful, as ever. And she tells me that she gave you my message. I received yours. Why did you come, after asking me to see you?"

"I couldn't be sure you'd accept the invitation," said Rollison. He sat down and stretched out his legs. The coat and stick were by his side, within reach. He took out cigarettes, and saw the other's eyes narrow, almost in alarm; that faded when Rollison lit up. "Nice little place you have here. There's always a fortune in crime for the lucky ones, isn't there?"

"There is always a fortune in fools," said de Vignon, in the same friendly voice, "and that is how I make mine, Mr. Rollison. You, however, are not a fool. You have a young lady in your care who was foolish enough to run away when" – he shrugged – "it was in her best interests, and mine, to stay in Paris. However, she is not likely to do me any harm while in London, and I do not think she will be foolish enough to say anything which might harm her—or harm me. Go back and look after her, Mr. Rollison, and you will not meet any more difficulties. I believe that certain mutual friends did inconvenience you in London, but they won't again. They were most ill-advised. Just return and look after your protégée, and be a sensible man."

"Or else?" murmured Rollison.

De Vignon smiled blandly.

"This is a strange city, Mr. Rollison, and you know it only as a visitor." He stood up, went across to the chair, and picked up the stick. He swung it, like a club, and took it back to his desk. "Paris is so gay, enchanting, amusing. But it has its ugly sides, and you are close to one of them now. Don't get any closer."

Rollison said: "I see." He got up leisurely, and again the big man's eyes narrowed, and his right hand hovered near a bell-push at the side of the door. "I'll be on my way," said Rollison, and reached the door and turned the key in the lock. He turned, looking amiable. "Now I'm on my way back, and we can't be interrupted so easily. What were you saying?"

Chapter Eleven

And Takes His Leave

Rollison dropped the door-key into his pocket. De Vignon, with a taut smile, picked up Rollison's gun, and while holding it, opened a drawer and took out another. Then he placed both on the table in front of him, and picked up the knife.

"This is a barbaric-looking weapon, Mr. Rollison."

"Your mistake. You should know what it is."

"And what is it?"

"A cracksman's tool. Any cracksman worth his union rate could—"

"Cracksman?" de Vignon frowned, as if this skirmish were important. "I don't quite understand what—oh, of *course*! I had forgotten your Raffles. You mean, it is a thief's equipment."

"That's right."

"Are you a thief?"

"Supposing we don't go into that too closely," murmured Rollison. "You'd hate to embarrass me. If I can't get into places where I want to get in, that little gadget helps a lot. I've had a lot of practice in using it, too."

There was a different, inquisitive look in de Vignon's eyes, almost as if there were a question in his mind which he could not pluck up the courage to ask. He put the knife down and picked up the card; he had shown no sign of nervousness, but a gun was within hand's reach.

"And this is the card which strikes terror, you say," he mused.

"I exaggerated," said Rollison, apologetically. "I wanted to impress you. The idea's quite neat, though. I collected a reputation for brains and brawn, and befriended the down and outs in the East End of London. Became almost their champion, so they say. All the little crooks who wanted protection from the police came and had a talk with me. I picked up odds and ends of information about the bigger crooks, and with that was able to —persuade shall we say?—the bigger crooks into doing practically what I wanted. Otherwise, with the knowledge I'd picked up, they might have found themselves in serious trouble with the police. Congratulate me."

"I wonder how true that is."

"Ask your friend Downing," said' Rollison promptly. "He has a grudge against me. I gave him away to the police when he had finished a job for me, and was no further use." De Vignon smiled more easily. "I see. That is most interesting. Downing calls you a squealer, whatever that may mean. He says that you are as friendly with the police as with the criminals—having a foot in each camp."

"That's exactly what I've been saying," said Rollison.

"I wonder." De Vignon turned the card over again, and read the orthodox printed words. "And this is where you live? Do you do anything for a

living?" Rollison gulped: "You mean—*work?*"

"I mean work."

"Look here," said Rollison indignantly, "we've kept this on a friendly footing, so far."

De Vignon stared – and then threw back his head and laughed. It was a deep and rollicking sound, and for a moment almost made the man likeable. But even the laughter could not take away the hint of corruption; the impression that this man lived as a carrion bird, upon the misfortunes and the follies of others. Rollison stood smiling, almost simpering, until the big man stopped.

"Funny, isn't it?" murmured Rollison. "After all, why work when you can live a useful life without it?"

"Obviously there are some things we have in common," said de Vignon. "I wonder—"

Rollison went to the desk. De Vignon's right hand moved towards the nearer gun, but he did not pick it up. Rollison sat on the desk and took a cigarette from a plain gold box; then he lit it from the table-lighter.

"I've been wondering when you would begin to wonder," he said. "M'sieu le Comte, you have a mind. Use it. England isn't the place it was. There isn't the money, and we so-called men of the world have become bloated capitalists who batten on society. Some of us mourn a past age. But there are still countries where tradition and breeding *mean* something. Aren't there? I've often thought—"

He paused.

De Vignon looked at him intently, with something like approval in his eyes.

"You have often thought what, Mr. Rollison?"

Rollison said: "There aren't many pickings left in London. The risks are too big, even if you get away with anything. Damn it, there are times when I have to be law-abiding! I've fooled both sides for years, but today it's more difficult. I'm all for an easier life, I'm not getting any younger."

"I see," said de Vignon. He turned, and pressed a button in what looked like a cupboard, flush to the wall, behind him. A cocktail cabinet opened slowly and soundlessly, with an array of glasses and bottles. "Cognac?"

"I thought we might come to understand each other," purred Rollison.

"I think perhaps we shall," murmured de Vignon. "The glasses are heated. Mr. Rollison, why did you come to Paris?"

"To find out everything I could."

"What did you know of Odette Rivière?"

Rollison smiled; the lines at his mouth were deep and there was merriment in his eyes.

"Poor Odette," he said, and plunged on with outward confidence. "She thinks that she is with friends. Why disabuse her? I tried to make her talk, but she wouldn't—can you imagine, she pretended to lose her memory, to save herself from answering questions! Quite remarkable."

Would the guess be right?

“Excellent,” said de Vignon. “When did you first hear about her?”

When my spies told me that Downing was a regular visitor to Paris,” said Rollison. “I watched him, and eventually came to Marcel and Odette. Marcel is in serious trouble. Will he crack?”

“If you mean, will he talk—I expect so. If you wonder whether anything he can say would harm me, no, it will not. It might harm Odette and others, but not me.” De Vignon’s voice became gentle. “Mr. Rollison, I think there might be room for a man of your attainments in Paris, after all.”

“Ah,” said Rollison.

“I should like to think about the possibilities,” said de Vignon. “I need to find out whether what you say about yourself is true. I have remarkable ways of finding out, and have friends in the most unexpected places. Will you do me the honour of having dinner with me, tomorrow night? By then, I may have some further information. Because—” De Vignon leaned forward, and his eyes became clouded; it was possible to imagine pictures following each other through the man’s mind. “Because I cannot work for ever with such imbeciles as Downing, and I need an English agent.”

Rollison’s eyebrows shot up.

“Agent or partner?”

De Vignon laughed again in great good humour.

“Very well, partner! I might even welcome some assistance in Paris, Mr. Rollison; there are some individuals who might be more effectively dealt with by a stranger. Now! I have work to do. Can I offer you entertainment for the night? Or company? Anything you wish.”

“I need just one thing,” said Rollison. “Sleep. I’m going to need my wits about me tomorrow night!”

He went across the room and picked up his overcoat. De Vignon helped him to put it on, by which time Rollison had his stick in his hand, the gun and knife in his pocket. They smiled. De Vignon did not offer to shake hands; it was one of the things for which Rollison was really grateful.

Latimer was sitting in a taxi, round the corner. He must have been looking out of the back window, for the door opened before Rollison came up. Latimer didn’t get out, but called him, and Rollison got in. The stick poked into Latimer’s legs, and he winced.

“Sorry.”

Rollison began to toy with the gold handle of the stick. The taxi started off, obviously under orders.

“All in one piece,” said Latimer.

“So far. But contaminated.”

“Did you see him?”

“He was our Slav. Not a Slav, but a slug. As foul as they come, far worse than the things that crawl. This job is full of atmosphere, but I don’t want to have much of the gaiety at the Rue de 1’Arbre. He despoils beauty and—”

“All very high-sounding,” growled Latimer. “What the dickens are you doing with that stick?”

"Nervous tension. I'd like to use it on de Vignon's head."

"Relax. Anyway, why didn't you?"

"Don't be silly," said Rollison. "We're buddies. Partners in embryo, if only I can make sure that de Vignon gets the right dope about me in the morning. He'd be the type to have contact with the *Sûreté,* wouldn't he?"

"He would."

"How can I meet a highly placed member of the *Sûreté!* Of course, I could telephone Grice, and he would do the necessary, with reservations, but there might be difficulty in getting hold of friend Grice tonight. You know what long-distance telephone calls are. Any influence?"

"I don't know what you're up to," Latimer said, "but I think I know a man who—"

"Knows a man who knows a policeman," said Rollison seraphically. "Lead him to me. Not at the *Mulle,* I think I'll be watched there. Some little place where I'm not likely to be noticed. We weren't followed from the Rue de l'Arbre, which is a good thing—de Vignon is having the *Hôtel Mulle* watched, so didn't think the shadowing was necessary. What can you do, my cosmopolitan?"

Latimer laughed. "I'll drop you at the Madeleine. Go to the Restaurant des Truites and wait there." He gave directions.

Rollison did not go at once to the restaurant, but telephoned Scotland Yard, from a hotel. He had some difficulty, but eventually reached Grice.

"Don't ask me to get you out of your troubles," said Grice promptly.

"Just advice," said Rollison. "Name some *Sûreté* man who might treat me without scorn."

Grice laughed, and considered.

"Your best bet is Poincet. After that—"

He named several eminent men at the *Sûreté Générale.*

The Restaurant des Truites was small, panelled, spotless and with an atmosphere far pleasanter than that at the Rue de l'Arbre. The *patron* concealed his disappointment that Rollison did not require a full-course dinner, and was happy that he should stay, with the solace of a bottle, until a friend called to see him. The friend was nearly an hour in coming, but no one at the restaurant minded. There were only half a dozen people there, in one party, two of them English, one American. They all laughed loudly, for they had finished with the serious business of eating. When their funny stories were beginning to pall on Rollison the door opened and a fat man came in.

He entered with the air of a conqueror, and was greeted as if he were a king. The *patron* and two others hurried forward, took his hat, his coat, his stick, and bowed. He was dressed in slightly old-fashioned black clothes which were a trifle too tight for him everywhere; the only remarkable thing was a large diamond tie-pin, placed in the knot of his tie. He spoke as if he were the lord of creation, and made his way to Rollison's table. He picked

up the bottle.

His eyes glowed.

"I shall join you," he announced.

M'sieu le patron looked perturbed.

"M'sieu awaits a friend, who—"

"I am the friend," said the newcomer, grandly; and winked at Rollison. "We should like to be left alone, Henri."

A second glass appeared, the attendant myrmidons disappeared, as if by magic; and by good fortune, the party of six broke up and made a noisy way into the quiet, narrow street outside.

"You are Rollison? I am Paul Poincet. I have a friend in London, with a strange name: Grice. By remarkable coincidence," continued M'sieu Poincet in excellent but whispered English, "my friend m'sieu le Superintendent was on the telephone only this evening. He told me that I might expect a visit from another friend of his. He even" – merry blue eyes glowed with delight – "he even suggested that his friend would find himself in trouble and would need assistance to extricate himself. So! You see how widely spread is the net of Scotland Yard."

Rollison poured wine, and looked sad. The merry light faded from Poincet's eyes.

"He said nothing but good of you, Mr. Rollison."

"But gave the wrong directions. I don't want to get out of trouble."

"No?" Poincet was cautious.

"I want to get into it."

The merriment returned. The Frenchman had plump pink cheeks, with tiny purple veins in them and in his broad nose. He had full, soft lips and a waxed moustache, thin black hair and ears which seemed as if they were glued to the side of his head.

"This is not surprising! How, please?"

"What do you know of the man who calls himself le Comte de Vignon?"

After a short pause, Poincet said gently: "Nothing that is good, my friend. Unhappily—he is a clever one. With many friends and much money. M'sieu, I will be embarrassingly frank with you, and that is not because I have wined well, but because I had the strongest good references from your friend Grice. Rid me of the scourge, de Vignon, and I shall be happy; this shall become the most law-abiding city in the world! But—such miracles do not come to pass. M'sieu le Comte—you see, even I have grown to talk of him like that—does nothing illegal himself. *Nothing.* But if you could do even a little to—"

Poincet paused, frowned, drank again, and then took a cigar-case from his pocket; the cigars were long and dark. He lit one.

"No," he declared. "It is impossible. You shall not try conclusions with M'sieu le Comte, it is too dangerous. I shall get you into no trouble with him. M'sieu, my mind is made up."

He paused, hopefully.

Chapter Twelve

Bad Reputation

Rollison poured out more wine, settled back in his comfortable chair, took out cigarettes and fitted one into a holder which he seldom used. He looked sleepy and sad but his eyes were neither; they matched the hopefulness in Poincet's. Yet his voice was mournful.

"My mind isn't made up, that's the trouble. I know what to do, but don't know how to do it. It's such a wonderful chance, too. M'sieu le Comte is already half-convinced that I am as big a rogue as he. He fell for the whole story. Yes, it's a great pity."

"Story?" squeaked Poincet.

"It was one of those meetings when all went well," enlarged Rollison. "First he tried to stop me from reaching Paris, next he tried to send me away, and then I went to see him. He—"

"C'est impossible!" In astonishment, Poincet lapsed from his English.

"What's impossible?"

"No one without a card of approval could go to see de Vignon. He is unapproachable. Even I—" Poincet gulped. "That is not important. You could not have seen de Vignon in person."

"Big, broad, brutal and corrupt," Rollison murmured. "Suave, sarcastic, safe—he thinks—with his bodyguards at Number 19 Rue de l'Arbre. He was very anxious to make me leave Paris, that's probably why he waved the magic wand and let me in."

Poincet breathed: "I am almost persuaded that you *saw* M'sieu le Comte."

"We nearly had a fight, then reason came rallying to the rescue. I hadn't a chance to get out, he was probably right about the mysterious disappearances which happen in Paris, so I parleyed. Conferred," he amended hastily, for Poincet looked about to interrupt. "I suggested that he was ill-advised to want me to go away. Paris is the right place for me, I have an evil reputation in London, and I might be of great service to him. On the grounds that two bad men are better than one. I complained bitterly about the difficulty of making a fortune in England and said what a sad day it was for the aristocracy—"

"Nom d'un nom!" cried Poincet. "You have the genius!"

"Eh?"

"But what else? There is one thing which makes M'sieu le Comte almost a human being. His love for his ancestors and his belief in the proper place of the aristocrat. There is his weakness, but usually he is on his guard against it. He would not expect you to know of the weakness." Poincet took the long black cigar from his lips and looked at the palely glowing end. "Proceed, milord!"

Rollison grinned.

"I think you and I are going to get along together."

"What is it you require of me?"

Rollison said diffidently: "Or, of course, you may challenge me to a duel. It's quite probable that everyone at the *Sûreté* is proof against blandishments and persuasion. On the other hand, if M'sieu le Comte has a friend who has a friend at the *Sûreté Générale* it is just possible that he would ask for a confidential report on the upstart Englishman. Isn't it?"

Poincet said softly: "So. My friend Grice was right about you." A faint smile touched his lips but not his eyes. "There is not, you understand, much corruption. In fact there is very little, very little. But such information as that—yes, from a minor official, it could be obtained. And you wish me to give you a bad reputation at my office and throughout the police district."

"That's it," said Rollison. "So that M'sieu le Comte will really believe that I'm a bad man."

"Yes," said Poincet. "Yes." He was not enthusiastic, and for the first time, Rollison wondered whether he had gone too far. "Yes," repeated Poincet. "You understand, of course, that it would perhaps prevent you from obtaining help *from* the police. You would—but no!" He thumped the table. "I am a hundred times a fool! You can have from me a little card, instructing all officers to give you assistance, and then all will be well. *Yes.* It can be done!"

His eyes glowed.

"Wonderful," murmured Rollison. "But no card."

"No *card!"*

*"*Because if I were to be searched and the card found, the game would be up."

Poincet took out his cigar again, looked at it and then at Rollison. It was the most serious moment since he had arrived.

"Mr. Rollison, your attention, please. You do not quite understand. In Paris—and I well know in all big cities—there are evil men who have no scruples. Murder to them is not murder but an incident, the killing of a fly, at worst a troublesome wasp. In London, you have your friends, you know the district. Here in Paris, it is different. In London you can distinguish between an enemy and a friend, here in Paris you cannot. I can—*you* cannot. Without some protection, you would have little chance to survive. You understand, I am serious."

"Ah," said Rollison.

They sat in silence, Rollison toying with the stem of his glass. From a doorway, the *patron* watched them for an anxious moment, and then quietly crept away. There was no sound in the restaurant, and none came from outside.

Then Rollison said: "Then perhaps Madame Thysson could help me."

"Nonsense! In this, she could not. She and de Vignon quarrel. Her reputation is mysterious, but—"

"Only that?"

"She is a plague, that woman," growled Poincet. "You never know what

she will be up to next."

"Not a scourge?" asked Rollison sweetly.

"Are you pretending to know Paris better than I? She is a mystery. Now de Vignon—"

"Have you lost men trying to get evidence against de Vignon?"

"Several men," Poincet said sombrely.

"You owe it to those men as well as to—Paris?—to do everything possible to find the evidence. And now when a chance, a slim chance but a real one, is put into your hand, you reject it. Why?"

Poincet sighed.

"I have the responsibility. You are an English man, if there should be trouble for you—"

"All the police in England know that I go looking for trouble."

Poincet's eyes brightened. He drew on the cigar until he made a chimney of his mouth, and gradually he began to smile.

"My reckless friend," he said, "you win."

He held out his hand.

Poincet looked as if a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He became gay, almost boyish, and banged on the table, calling for another bottle of wine, amiably berating the *patron* for his slowness, exuding cheerfulness. When the bottle had come and the *patron* retired again, he said:

"It is a chance. Everything I can do, understand, I shall do."

"Thanks. I should like two or three things," said Rollison, almost lazily. "First, the address of a good make-up man. Really good, and from whom I can get some old clothes."

"Pah!" scoffed Poincet, in a different voice. "The Achilles heel, m'sieu. What would you do with make-up? It is a child's game. Almost I am disappointed." He looked it.

"A make-up artist," Rollison said firmly. "And then, the name and address of a good criminal."

Poincet frowned, with a mixture of bewilderment and condemnation. The conversation had taken a completely different turn, he was obviously doubting the wisdom of his decision, and perhaps wondering whether he should reverse it. When serious, he was no longer a figure of mild comedy, but a man to be reckoned with.

"There is no such thing, m'sieu."

"Well, then, a reformed criminal. One who knows the bad districts—Montmartre, Montparnasse, all of them. A man who can give me information and help me to mix with the people there."

Poincet threw up his hands.

"What a student of human nature! How right! I shall always believe my friend Grice in future. He said you were mad. Quite mad. You *are* mad. You speak French well. So well that almost you could be taken for a Frenchman; almost. But the argot—it is like your Cockney. Unless you are familiar with

it, you cannot mix with the people. It is one thing to take the big risk, another to behave with folly. Become friends with M'sieu le Comte, by all means, but this other game of disguises and dressing-up—please, forget it."

Rollison said mildly: "Not so mad as childish, perhaps." He smiled, one-sidedly. The smile gradually faded, and his lips curved in a sneer, one corner up higher than the other. The sneer touched his eyes, which narrowed and had an oblique look. Put him in fancy dress, and he was Mephisto to the life. He leaned forward, and his hand stretched out and touched Poincet's hand. His fingers pressed tightly, and gripped. Then he began to speak, in French – not the French of the *salon,* but an *argot* which a man could pick up only in the Paris gutters. He went on and on. He kept his voice low, but observed out of the corner of his eye three men appear at the far doorway, which led to the kitchen; the *patron* and his remaining staff were hypnotised.

He finished.

Poincet, whose eyes had widened until they were astonished, rounded orbs, gulped and licked his lips, and did not try to free his hand until Rollison took his away.

"*Sacré diable!"* he whispered. "You shall have everything you require."

Rollison turned the key in the lock of his room at the *Hôtel Mulle* with his left hand, and kept his right about the gun, inside his coat pocket. He did not expect trouble tonight, but carelessness was often its own danger. He made no sound as he opened the door – or when he saw the light on in the big room. The door of the foyer was ajar, letting the light shine through. He stepped inside, leaving the outer door open. He heard the rustle of a paper. He crept nearer to the open door, keeping to one side. Then he saw a pair of crossed legs, belonging to a man who sat in an easy chair; and he also saw the end of a newspaper.

He opened the door wide, and stepped inside.

"Put 'em up!" he barked.

The legs uncrossed, the man started violently and the newspaper fell. Latimer, scared out of his wits, started to get up, then dropped back again. He eased his collar and didn't speak until the colour slowly returned to his cheeks. Then he said deliberately:

"You cold-blooded devil! I'll pay you for that."

"Hallo, Pete. Having a nice read?" Rollison closed both doors, took off his coat and flung it across the bed, with his stick. "How long have you been here?"

"About an hour. You're not the only one who can bribe the hall porter. See Poincet?"

"Yes."

"Any luck?"

"Yes."

"You don't deserve it," said Latimer, but he laughed. "You're opening my eyes to a lot, Rolly. Whatever I may say in future, I wouldn't have missed this for a fortune. Did you seriously get Poincet's promise to co-operate?"

"He let himself be blarneyed, and he's dead set against de Vignon. He wouldn't let himself be drawn on the subject of Madame Thysson, but he doubtless has his reasons."

"Meaning, he could be on her pay-roll?"

"Meaning that he has his reasons for diverting most attention to de Vignon. Here's the general scheme." Rollison sat on the bed, propped himself up with pillows, and talked freely for nearly half an hour. When he had finished, a clock over the mantelpiece showed that it was five minutes to one.

Latimer said: "And in less than seven hours! I don't really believe it."

"All I've done so far is prepare a noose for my neck," said Rollison, and yawned. "Poincet gave me some useful data about M'sieu le Comte. Now I want more on Madame Thysson, including a detailed plan of her apartment."

"I've got that."

"Wonderful! Feel tired?"

"I'm never tired." Latimer yawned very widely.

"You know, Pete, you don't have to come," Rollison said. "You could find yourself in a nasty spot, and you've already done a job in a million. Have a good night's rest, and—"

"I've hired a car with a special driver—a reporter on *Figaro*. Soul of discretion, who doesn't know what we're up to, but wants to run a story on the Toff anyhow, and swears he'll wait until this is over. The law about carrying guns isn't so strict here as in England, either." He patted his pocket, and grinned.

The car, a new Renault, pulled up on the near side of one of the Seine's many bridges, and Rollison got out. Latimer and the *Figaro* reporter wished him well in a whisper. He walked across the bridge briskly. There was a moon, and the drizzle had gone, although the streets were still damp. The moon reflected, shimmering grey, on the quiet waters of the Seine. The bridge was a new one which looked ghostly white. The houses on the far bank, Quai de Béthune on one side and Quai de Bayenne on the other, looked tall and dark against the powdery sky.

Rollison turned left at the other side of the bridge. There was a wall, about waist high, alongside the river, then a narrow road, with just room for two cars to pass, then a yard-wide pavement in front of the houses. There were no more than a dozen of these. Each was approached through a courtyard, and the main doors, at each courtyard, were closed and probably locked; they might be bolted. They were like stable doors, and inlet in each was a smaller door.

Rollison reached Number 12.

It was in darkness, but so were all the others. He examined the Yale lock of the smaller door, then took out his knife. He opened a blade which was of remarkably thin and pliable steel, and began to push it into the lock. He made little sound. The blade gradually worked its way round the barrel of

the lock, and poked out the other side.

He turned the handle and pushed; and the door opened.

He withdrew the blade, closed the knife and put it away, and stepped into the dark courtyard. He pushed the door to behind him, but didn't close it; in any case it would not have latched, that method of opening a Yale lock had a disadvantage; the lock needed repair before it would work again.

He stood in unrelieved darkness for some seconds, until his eyes gradually became accustomed to it, and he could see what had been invisible before. Madame Thysson's *appartement* was on the left, although she owned both the houses, and the other *appartements* were occupied by different members of her family or her staff.

Latimer had told Rollison this; and also told him that although he knew Madame Thysson had night watchmen who might be called bodyguards, he did not know where they might be stationed.

Rollison moved across the yard, over uneven cobbles, and reached the doorway leading to the stairs and Madame Thysson's *appartement.* There was no letter-box; nothing through which he could look; nothing to tell him whether anyone was on the other side or not.

Chapter Thirteen

Madame Thysson

Rollison pushed the second door; it opened, and he stepped from darkness into darkness. There was no sound. He went forward cautiously, with his hand outstretched, and crouching a little. His hand touched the stairs, and the carpet covering them. He went back and closed the door gently, then began to walk up the stairs. There was a stone wall and a hand-rail; he kept a hold on the hand-rail all the time; his right hand was about his gun, which he kept in his pocket.

He reached the first landing; Madame's *appartement* was on the next floor.

Latimer's informant had been quite certain about the bodyguards.

Rollison went past the door on this landing, but did not go straight up. He stood two or three steps above the landing, pressed tightly against the wall. His ears and eyes were strained to catch sound and light, but there was none. He kept still. The quiet made his heart thump, there was something almost uncanny about this; he had a feeling that he was being fooled. He obeyed the instinct to do nothing until he was quite sure that no one was near.

He heard a creak.

It might be a door; it might be a hand on the wooden hand-rail; it might be simply one of the noises of the night.

It came again, from behind him.

A door had opened.

If he couldn't see, no one else could. He was on the door side of the wall. He stepped across, flattening himself against the opposite wall. A third creak came, so faint that probably he would not have noticed it had he been on the move. He stared at the door, which was dark, and could only just make out its outline, couldn't be sure whether it was wide open or closed. He heard a faint rustle of sound. Then he heard breathing, soft, bated.

Gradually the figure of a man loomed black against the greyness, no more than a shape; it would have been invisible but for the lighter colour of the wall opposite Rollison. The man was close to the far wall, probably holding the hand-rail; almost certainly he was looking ahead, not expecting anyone on a level with him.

He passed Rollison.

Rollison let him mount two steps, then crossed the stairs again and went after him. There was still no light from inside, but there was a window at the next landing. Against this, the shape of the man showed more clearly. The head and shoulders looked big, although that might have been because of the shadowy effect.

Rollison took two more steps quickly, the second muffled by the carpet. Before he could act, he must be on a level with the other.

The man reached the higher landing, and stepped forward.

Rollison reached it, too, and was only a yard away; the other seemed almost afraid to breathe. Rollison stretched out his hands, then shot them forward, clutching at the man's neck. There was a single gasp, a hissing of breath, and a heel kicked sharply against his shin. But his fingers were embedded deeply into the thick neck, and he pressed mercilessly on the wind-pipe. The man struggled and fought for breath, back-heeling desperately, but Rollison didn't relax. The struggles gradually slackened.

Rollison eased his pressure, and the man lay slack against him.

Rollison moved to one side, let the man fall against his left arm, and put his right beneath the knees. The other was a dead weight, almost too much to carry. Rollison was gasping for breath when he reached the landing below. He leaned his victim against the wall, and opened the door through which the man had come. Then he dragged the limp form after him, and closed the door.

Here, he had made some noise; but there was no sound from the *appartetnent.*

He took out a pencil torch and shone it round until he saw an electric switch. He stood by this and shone the torch around a small hallway. Four doors, three closed and one open, led off it. He went into the room with the open door, and flashed his torch round. It was an empty sitting-room. He went back and switched on the light.

His victim was big, dark-haired, young, with a fresh and rather open face. He was only just breathing. Rollison carried him into the sitting-room, then went back and put out the hall light. In the room again, he switched that light on.

He loosened his victim's collar, took out a brandy flask, paused, and then ran through the man's pockets. He found a key-case, with several keys, and transferred it to his own pocket. He did the same with a sheathed knife and with a rubber cosh; the bodyguard had been well prepared. Rollison put the brandy flask back, unused, and studied the room more closely. In one wall, near the fireplace, was a light panel, like those used in hospitals and on some telephone switchboards; a light would glow when a bell was pressed. Rollison went across and studied it – and decided that it was the nerve centre of the burglar-alarm system. One of these lights had gone on when he had opened the outer door, another when he had opened the inner door.

The watchman had been over-confident in thinking that he could handle this emergency himself.

He was breathing more evenly.

Rollison examined the bruises made by his own fingers, and felt the pulse; it beat unevenly, but fairly strongly. He waited until there was no doubt that the man was coming round, bound his wrists and ankles, then tied a scarf round his mouth; he could breathe only through his nose.

Rollison went out, and closed the door.

He stepped on to the landing, turned towards Madame Thysson's floor – and lights flashed on, half-blinding him, and a gun was poked into his side.

The gun hurt. Rollison moved, and was pushed to one side. He caught a glimpse of a man behind him, then felt a heavy weight descend on the back of his head. He didn't lose consciousness, but a second blow, on the nape of the neck, seemed to split his head in two; he collapsed.

A bright light was on when he came round. It hurt his eyes. He was lying on something hard and yet soft – a carpet. He could feel the pile beneath his hands. He kept his eyes closed. At first, he could feel only pain in his head, and could not think. But gradually the pain eased, and he felt his other senses stirring. He could smell perfume. He didn't open his eyes, for the light was too bright even with them closed. He didn't move. But his hands weren't tied – one rested against the floor, the other on his own waist. He did not know whether he was alone, for there was a loud drumming in his ears; he could not detect the sound of anyone else breathing.

If he could sit upright, his head might feel better; but he did not think that he had the strength to do that, yet. He waited for a while, then moved his right hand slowly, to keep the light off his eyes; that was better. He pressed his other hand against the floor, to lever himself up, and heard a rustle of movement. The perfume seemed stronger.

He felt a soft hand at his wrist, an arm slid between his back and the floor. He was able to sit up, with that help. He couldn't see the woman, but the folds of her dress brushed against his head. Even that was painful.

She didn't speak, but let him sit there without anything to lean against; later, he felt something push against his back – a chair. She had given him the support he badly needed, he could relax. He kept his eyes closed and his right hand in front of them, but still the light was too strong.

It dimmed.

He took his hand away, and dared to open his eyes. There was light behind him, but most of the room was in shadow. It was a *salon,* in the old tradition; a woman's room with Louis Quinze furniture, silvery greys and cream colouring; restful. The woman was behind him, and he had no idea whether anyone else was with her. All he could see was the furniture, the dressing-table, chairs and a fragile-looking couch. Another door, opposite, was ajar; he guessed that was the bedroom.

He heard a movement behind him, but didn't try to move his head to see the woman. The perfume-became more noticeable again, subtle and pleasing.

Then a hand was thrust in front of his face, a long, slim hand, on the middle finger of which was a single solitaire ring, which scintillated even in that poor light. In the hand was a small bottle, with the top off, and he smelt something stronger than perfume. The bottle was thrust under his nose; he hadn't even the spirit to think "*Smelling sails, for me!"* The sharp smell stung his nostrils and helped his head. Tears came to his eyes, but when they cleared he felt better.

The woman put the bottle in front of him again; he sniffed, bringing more

tears, but didn't try to look at her. He had enough sense left to play her game. She wasn't ready for him to see her.

The bottle disappeared.

A door opened, there was a clinking sound, as of china. Someone else was in the room, but didn't speak. In a few seconds a cup of strong black coffee was held in front of him, and he took it and sipped. It was hot and very sweet; the best thing he could have had. He went on sipping. The door closed, and he believed that he was alone with the woman again.

Why did she play this game of hide-and-seek?

He finished the coffee and groped in his pockets. The first thing he realised was that his gun had gone, but an old brass cigarette lighter was still there, part of his props. He fumbled for a cigarette, and as he put it to his lips a light was thrust close to his face. He lit the cigarette, and coughed; it brought the pain back to his head, but that soon turned into a dull, throbbing ache, and he was glad of the tobacco.

He didn't speak.

Doubtless she was waiting for him to start, but two could play that game. Game! He was in the *appartement* of Madame Thysson, who, if Latimer's information was accurate, had a reputation as bad as de Vignon's.

Then he saw the mirror.

It was in front and a little to one side of him; he didn't notice it until a light above it was switched on, from behind him. He caught a glimpse of a long skirt, but then the woman disappeared, and he could see only himself. He did not make a pretty picture. He was dressed in old, torn, dirty clothes, obtained from the man to whom Poincet had recommended him. His face was dirty – partly with real dirt, partly with make-up. Thick stubble already showed at his chin and cheeks. The make-up artist whom he had visited had done a good job. His eyes looked narrow, his nose broader; and his hair was untidy. On the right temple was an ugly bruise, and at his hip there was a cut which had bled slightly. He wore a muffler knotted loosely round his throat; he would have been a credit to the East End or to the worse district of Paris.

But anyone who looked closely could see that he was disguised.

The light above the mirror went out.

Now he could see only shadowy reflections in it, and the red glow of his own cigarette. He was feeling much better and could get up; but should he make the first move, or force her to make it? He would be more comfortable in a chair than leaning against it, but—

He sat unmoving.

He heard a rustle of movement, and thought that the woman was coming in front of him, but she stopped just behind him. He had one cause for satisfaction; she spoke at last, in a charming voice. She spoke in French, which meant that she took it for granted that French was his language.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why have you come to see me?"

He was sure, now, that she was Madame Thysson.

Chapter Fourteen

Cat And Mouse

Rollison did not answer and did not move. The woman was close to him, speaking just above his head. While it amused her to hide from him he would indulge the whim; that wouldn't harm him.

"Answer me, please. Who are you and why have you come?"

He said softly: "I came to kill Madame Thysson."

She caught her breath; whatever she had expected, that wasn't it. Something brushed against his head, and set it throbbing again; probably her hand. She moved away from him.

"Why did you wish to kill me?"

He started, deliberately, to suggest that he hadn't realised that she was Madame Thysson. He turned his head to the right; her voice had come from the left, and so he didn't see her.

"Tell me, why?" she insisted.

He had come in the guise of a Paris *apache,* but she knew that was a disguise; so he had spoken in ordinary French. He had invented two stories to use in an emergency, and one was now an obvious choice, but he mustn't be too ready to answer.

She showed no impatience, only insistence.

"Why did you wish to kill me?*"*

*"*You sent one girl too many to her ruin."

"Oh, she said, and sounded amused. "So it is an *affaire de coeur*. How gallant!"

He turned round, slowly, put out a hand to support himself against the chair and got to his feet. He saw her for the first time – and although he was prepared he felt a sense of shock. He leaned heavily against the chair, staring at her.

The half-light increased the effect of the mask she wore.

It was a beautiful thing, which fitted over her face, hiding it completely; but he could just see where it joined her neck, and where it finished at her forehead. It was the face of a young and beautiful woman, but a woman without expression, as a mask must be. He was fascinated, and she stood quite still.

He could not tell how old she was. She was tall, and no one could complain about her figure. She wore a cream-silk dressing-gown, fastened at the waist with silk ribbons, and beneath it a silk nightdress or pyjamas of a deeper cream colour. The sleeves were long, and both garments were high at the neck. Only her hands really showed, and as he knew, they were long and thin – the hands of a woman more young than old. She held them by her sides.

"Sit down," she said.

He pulled the chair round with an effort, so that he could sit facing her. He didn't have to pretend that she had startled him, and that he couldn't look away from the uncanny repose of that masked face. It was as if beauty had been donned to hide raddled corruption. She moved across to another chair and sat down. Her movements were flowing and easy, with studied grace. She rested one arm on the side of the chair and looked completely at ease.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Which of the girls has stirred you to such passion?"

"Supposing I told you?" he growled. "You'd make her suffer more than she's suffered already."

"I see. And if I ask your name, you will say that I can trace the girl through that, and make her suffer so much. Are you her lover? Her master? Her brother? Or" – there was a hint of laughter in her voice – "her father?"

Rollison didn't answer.

She spoke again, and her voice became harsh and grated in his ears, almost as if she had struck him.

"Or are you lying? Has de Vignon sent you?"

He opened his lips.

"Well? Did he send you?" she leaned forward until he could see her eyes behind the slits in the mask and could imagine the passion in them. "Tell me the truth. Hurry!"

"I don't know who you mean. You've ruined—" He broke off.

She sat back, and laughed; he had never known anything more uncanny than the motionless mask and the sound of laughter coming from the gap for the lips. It was easy to imagine cruelty in the laugh.

"So you nearly told me who," she said. "I wonder if you're telling the truth?" She stood up and came towards him, surprising him by her speed. Before he realised what she was about to do, she was behind him. Her hand pressed against the back of his head, then a finger probed, against the bruise. He had to set his teeth to stop himself from crying out. "Does that hurt?" she asked softly.

He didn't answer.

"I know how badly it hurts," she said, "and you know how much more I could hurt you if I wish. Imagine more blows there—not hard enough to make you unconscious, just a series of light blows. Would you like that?"

He growled: "I'd expect it."

"You'll get it if you lie to me. Have you come from de Vignon?"

She pressed her hand again, more gently, but the pressure hurt.

"I don't know what you mean."

She moved away; his head throbbed. She didn't return to her chair, and he looked towards the corner, by a closed door. She moved her hand, there was a series of sharp clicks, and every light in the room went on. The brilliance hit against his eyes like a cloud of stinging dust, and he closed them in agony. Through the drumming of the blood in his ears he thought he heard her laugh.

The light went out, until only the one was left.

"Did you come from de Vignon?"

"No!"

"I hope you are telling the truth. The consequences would be most unpleasant for you. Tell me of the girl who inspired you to come here."

Rollison didn't answer.

"She won't be hurt—it isn't her responsibility that she has a fool as a champion. If you don't name her, I shall assume that she doesn't exist. If I do that, I shall assume also that you've come from de Vignon. I do not like de Vignon or his friends."

Rollison said: "I didn't come from de Vignon, whoever he is, and I've said all I'm going to say."

He put his hands on the arm of the chair, and stood up. He managed without swaying. He took a step towards her, and behind the mask she laughed again.

"I shouldn't be foolish."

"Let me get out of here."

He took another step.

"So the gallant avenger has lost his courage! Here am I, a candidate for murder, and you anxious to escape and leave me alive. I don't think your passion is as great as it was when you came."

He took a third step.

"Stay where you are," she ordered.

She looked beyond him, suggesting that someone else was there. He ignored it and went on. Then he heard a faint whistling sound, felt a breath of wind pass his face – and a knife sprang into the door, a yard away from Madame Thysson; it had passed within an inch of his face.

He darted a glance behind him. A man, with another knife poised, stood in the other doorway.

"He is very clever with knives," said Madame Thysson musingly. "I believe that he can persuade anyone to talk. It was so, during the war, when he learned how to use one. On all kinds of people, especially on those who were spying on the Underground. He had reason to hate, and learned how to hate effectively. Would you like him to practise on you?"

Rollison hadn't moved since the knife had passed; but he wanted to move. He was only half himself, it would be some time before he had recovered from the blows over the head. He was in no state to play cat-and-mouse with mask-like beauty.

"So you wouldn't," said Madame Thysson. "Tell me the truth. Did you come because you're in love with a girl, or because de Vignon sent you to kill me? The first I could forgive. The second—"

The man in the doorway moved forward and took the knife out of the door. He stood by, feeling the point of the blade as if it were something he loved; he didn't glance at Rollison. He was near a table on which were Rollison's weapons, the knife and the gun.

"I shall soon lose patience," the woman said. "Which girl do you say you

are avenging?"

Rollison saw the man's eyes for the first time; also saw the way he gripped a knife, by the blade, as if to throw it. The woman laughed again. He wished he could tear the mask from her face, but she was out of reach; and the knife-thrower was not likely to miss at this range.

"Tell me her name," insisted Madame Thysson.

Rollison backed to the chair, sat down, wiped a hand across his forehead; and that wasn't all pretence. He could sense that the woman was gloating; the man seemed indifferent. He took out his cigarettes again and lit another cigarette, and then he took his life in his hands; or so he believed.

"Odette," he said. "Odette Rivière."

The little man jerked his head up, the woman thrust out her hands as if to fend off an invisible assailant. For the first time, she was off her guard; astounded.

"*Incroyable!"* gasped the man.

"It isn't possible," Madame Thysson said in a whisper. "Not Odette, she —"

She broke off.

Rollison felt as if new life had been breathed into him. He drew in the tobacco smoke and played with his cigarette-lighter, even laughed and stood up. Then he turned the tables completely. It was all done quickly, before the others had recovered. The cigarette-lighter was almost in the little man's face before he knew that Rollison had thrown it. He dodged to one side, but Rollison reached him before he could steady himself, wrenched his wrists and forced the knives out of his grip. They fell to the floor. Rollison stamped on one, leaned across and picked up his gun and knife. The woman was backing towards the door, but stopped when he stood within a yard of her, poising the gun.

"Yes," he said, "I am a friend of Odette. A good friend. I don't like what has been done to her."

He laughed again, in spite of the furious throbbing in his head. He knew that he couldn't stay to fight this out; unless he moved now, while he had a chance, he'd be finished. He moved towards the door. The woman stood as if she were made of stone. He stretched out a hand to touch the mask, and pulled; it wouldn't move. Then he heard the little man rushing at him, turned and thrust out his foot. The man ran into it, and went flying. Rollison reached the door, turned the key in the lock, and pulled it open. A man was standing only a yard away, gun in hand. Rollison fired, and the other's gun went flying against the wall. The roar of the shot merged with a cry of pain.

Rollison turned and ran across the hall, out of the door and on to the landing, then down the stairs. His head was pounding, he could keep going only by will-power and the knowledge of what would happen if he once faltered.

The front door was ajar. He rushed into the cold night air, with two men after him. He stumbled on the cobbles, recovered and went on. The little door in the large one which led to the street was also ajar. He scrambled

through and slammed it behind him, but with the damaged lock it wouldn't close properly. Then he ran towards the bridge. He hadn't the breath left to shout, feared every moment that the door would open again and the men give chase. He stumbled; he didn't think he could get to the other side of the bridge. He reached the near end and glanced over his shoulder.

The moonlight shone on the tall, dark houses and – on closed doors.

The car at the other end of the bridge started up.

Chapter Fifteen

Sleep

"And now I hope you're satisfied," said Latimer, leaning over him. "I've never seen such a mess. If you take my advice, you'll be on the first 'plane back to London in the morning—if you're still alive then."

Rollison lay back on his pillows at the *Hôtel Mulle,* and grinned weakly.

"First, sleep," he said.

"Sleep! You need a month's convalescence." Latimer straightened up, and moved to a chair.

They had been back for half an hour, and with Latimer's help Rollison had struggled out of his clothes. They lay in a heap near the foot of the bed. The reporter of the *Figaro* had driven away as soon as they had arrived here; on the journey Rollison had heard him talking to Latimer, but he had not taken in any of the conversation.

"It's nearly five," Latimer said. "I think I'll kip in the arm-chair. Any objection?"

"Do what you like, Pete. And thanks for everything. It's been quite a day. You'll feel better in the morning."

"*I'll* feel—" Latimer broke off, and chuckled.

"All right, Rolly. I'll put out the light, you can sleep some of it off. Er—just one thing."

"What?"

"Did you see her?"

"Mask and all."

"So she had that on, did she?" Latimer frowned. "In her sleep, too?"

"I was the one who went to sleep. All details when I wake up, and—" Rollison stopped abruptly, and sat up more quickly than he should have done.

After he had taken a cold shower Latimer had rubbed salve gently into his head, but he wouldn't know what it was like to be without a headache for a day or two.

"Good lord, I'm crazy!"

"You're the last to discover it."

"Get me Jolly on the telephone," begged Rollison. "Tell him I must speak to him."

"But—"

"Mayfair, London, 13—"

"I know your number," Latimer said. He seemed to know when to be obstinate and when to give way, for he lifted the receiver at once. "I'll probably take some time to get through, I'll wake you."

The call came through in three minutes, and when Rollison spoke to Jolly, his man sounded as if this were in the middle of the morning.

"It's good to hear from you, sir."

"Thanks. Jolly, this matters. I don't know how much, but it matters. The girl's name is Odette Rivière. How is she?"

"There is no change, except that she is more rested."

"Any trouble?" asked Rollison.

"I would not rate it that high, sir, but a man has been watching the house. I know he is French. He has shown no sign of activity at all, but for security I have enlisted the help of Bill Ebbutt, and the man is being watched in turn."

"Good," said Rollison, and paused.

"Have you any instructions about the young lady, sir?"

"As soon as she's awake, tell her that I have seen both the Comte de Vignon—got that?"

"The Comte de Vignon, yes."

"And Madame Thysson. Just tell her that, and see if it will make her talk. You *must* make her talk, Jolly. Find out whether she was running away from de Vignon or Thysson—no, wait a moment." He pressed a hand against his throbbing head. "She probably did escape from de Vignon, but she had some connection with Madame Thysson. Find out what it is. Get her story, and—"

He heard another sound at the other end of the line; and thought he heard Jolly gasp. He was prepared for anything, for indications of an attack, for another voice. Instead, he heard Jolly say: "Excuse me one moment, sir, the young lady is at the bedroom door."

Rollison said: "Then you can start on the questioning now. I—"

He stopped when he heard the girl speak. Her voice came faintly, but every word was distinct.

"*That is Mr. Rollison. Tell him to come back, tell him not to stay in Paris."*

*"*The young lady—" Jolly began.

"Yes, I heard," Rollison said. "Tell her I might come back at once if she'll tell you the whole truth. If she won't, there isn't a chance. Try hard, Jolly."

"You can be quite sure of that, sir. Are you still at the *Hôtel Mullel?* I received your telegram."

"Yes. If you can't get hold of me, speak to Poincet, at the *Sûreté Générale.* Make sure you're talking to him in person."

"Very good, sir."

"Good night," said Rollison.

He put down the receiver and dropped back on to the pillows. After the effort, his head throbbed viciously. He closed his eyes against the light, and hoped that Latimer would not talk. Latimer didn't, and soon put out the light. In a daze, Rollison heard him walking about the room, but didn't hear the chair creak as Latimer sat down for what remained of a night's rest.

Rollison looked at himself in the mirror, and grimaced; he was the *apache* to the life. He walked to the bathroom unsteady but very upright, and bathed his face. His head, while not really bad, still needed a lot of care. He returned to the bedroom and sat in front of the dressing-table, removing the

grease paint with spirit. That done, he went back and had a hot bath, followed by another cold shower; all he felt he needed were cold showers.

It was half-past eleven in the morning; Latimer had left a brief note, saying that he would not be long.

Rollison towelled his hair gingerly, then went back and ordered coffee. It had come by the time Latimer returned.

In his hand was a package wrapped up in white paper; it was the size of a small bottle.

"Hallo." His droll grin had a wholesome look, and he was as familiar and welcome as an old friend. "I've been having a session with a chemist, introduced by a friend who knows—"

"I know the friend-to-friend system," said Rollison, who had gone back to bed.

"And I have produced a pick-me-up. Guaranteed, the chemist says, to restore you to some semblance of order by tonight. I told him you were suffering from a combination of excessive drinking, gross over-eating and a fight in which you'd taken on six men all bigger than yourself. He still guaranteed his cure. Two doses now, and then one every two hours. You must have only light food, no wine or spirits, and you have to do all the usual things to the bruises on your head."

"Three doses, please," said Rollison. "Coffee?"

"I've had breakfast."

"Don't," shuddered Rollison.

Latimer looked sardonically amused.

"On the whole, you didn't come out of it badly, Rollison. Interviews with the Count and with Madame on the same night, and still one leg out of your coffin. Poincet doesn't approve of the second venture, but doesn't know it was you."

"You haven't been to see him?" Rollison looked horrified.

"My *Figaro* friend has. I'm to tell you that everything has been done as arranged, and that you have a terrible reputation at the *Sûreté Générale*. From today onwards, all well-dressed Englishmen in Paris will be suspect, and the jails will probably be full up by tonight." As he talked, Latimer measured out a white emulsion into a glass, and held it out to Rollison. "Drink."

Rollison drank; gasped; and shuddered.

"That'll larn you," said Latimer. "I can see I'll have to be on duty to make sure that you take the other doses. Oh, I've fixed the money, by the way. My Paris editor was affable and helpful—I told just a little, but didn't disclose the whole truth."

"Let's keep it in the family," said Rollison. He accepted a thick wad of thousand-franc notes.

"Wonderful, Pete, thanks. Any news?"

"Not yet. I'm going out to try to find some. If anyone else knows that Madame had a visitor, it will probably be all over the town by now."

Latimer laughed, and went out. Rollison drank more coffee, to get the vile

taste of the physic out of his mouth, and decided not to get up. If he weren't dressed, he couldn't be tempted to go out. He sent for English papers and *le Figaro,* but when they arrived, did no more than scan the headlines.

At a quarter to one, the telephone bell rang.

"There is a call from London for you," said the operator. "One minute, please."

The minute seemed an age; and dragged into several before a man came on the line. It was a relief to recognise Jolly's voice.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Has she come across?" Rollison was astonished at his own eagerness.

"I much regret to say that she has not," said Jolly. "She has gone so far as to promise to tell you everything *if* you return to London, but she refuses to say a word to me. She will not talk to the police, either—Mr. Grice and an interpreter have just gone. She is quite adamant. Is there any chance of you returning in the near future?"

"Certainly not until tomorrow," Rollison said.

There was heavy crackling on the line, and he had to concentrate to hear at all.

"I am extremely sorry that I can't report more satisfactorily," Jolly said, and sounded utterly miserable. "The language is a difficulty. I have a fair command of French, but cannot use quite the same approach as I could if she were able to speak English. Is there any other course of action you care to recommend?"

Rollison said: "Yes. Try again, and tell her that I've ordered you to bring her to Paris if she won't tell you everything she can. Ring me back as soon as you can."

"Very good," said Jolly.

Obviously he did not feel optimistic.

It seemed an age, but was little more than an hour, before the telephone bell rang. It was a London call. Rollison adjusted the pillows, waited and began to wonder if he had been cut off; then suddenly Jolly's voice sounded, this time with an undoubted note of satisfaction.

"That proved to be successful, sir."

"Wonderful! Does it help?"

"It may help you," said Jolly. "And it is instructive, in that she is really terrified of the thought of returning to Paris at this juncture. She—"

"Jolly," said Rollison, heavily.

"Yes, sir. I am trying to marshal my words effectively. The young lady's story is quite brief, and I don't want to give any part undue emphasis. She says that for some time she worked for Madame Thysson, as a mannequin. She was quite happy with Madame until she began to hear rumours about her activities. Then she met Marcel Blanc—BLANC, sir. She fell in love with him. Reading between the lines, I would say that it was because of stories of the less-savoury activities of Madame Thysson, of whom she had become very fond, that she flung herself at Marcel Blanc's head, as it were. A kind of emotional rebound."

Jolly paused; this time Rollison did not hurry him.

"She wanted to leave Madame Thysson, but that was not easy. It was evolved, between the young couple, that Miss Rivière should ask for a holiday, permission to visit London with Marcel and two others, an elderly married couple. Madame Thysson raised no objection. On arrival in London, the girl was taken to the home of a lady she had never seen before—the description is that of Lady Murren, sir."

"Well, well," murmured Rollison.

"However, this lady refused to receive her, and she was taken to a smaller house—Downing's. She did not know what had happened, but overheard the men saying they had killed the other woman and were planning to murder her. She ran away."

"And who shall blame her?"

"Very few people would," Jolly said soberly. "She says she is afraid to return to Paris in case she is attacked. My personal view, for what it is worth, is that she was and is terrified and" – Jolly paused – "very innocent and inexperienced, sir."

"Possibly."

"She says that she feels safe while here. She does not seem at all sure who is involved in the plot against her life—she doesn't want to think of it, and is very confused. She cannot understand why it is being done—she has no money, no position. She claims that she is—I suppose the right word is psychic, sir—and she is sure that harm will befall you in Paris. She says she feels it most strongly at this moment. She is a little hysterical, if I may say so, and talks of being surrounded by an aura of evil and corruption, but—"

"She was," Rollison said heavily.

"And she begs you to return. She doesn't want you to suffer by trying to help her."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," promised Rollison. "Meanwhile, some things are clearer. As Odette knew they had killed Lady Murren, obviously they had to get rid of her. Ruthlessness the watchword. Tell Grice about all this, Jolly, and ask him to inform Poincet at the *Sûreté Générale."*

"Very good." Jolly sounded both surprised and a little disapproving.

"And ask him to make sure the flat's watched, back and front, until it's over. I wouldn't put it past them to have another go at her. I think she'll be all right until tomorrow morning, I've an interesting appointment tonight. But if I miss my bus, big trouble may flare up pretty quickly. Do all that, won't you?"

"Without fail, sir. May I inquire how you have been progressing?"

Rollison laughed.

"I shouldn't, too closely. Odette's forebodings are on the mark, but you know the old story about being forewarned. Look after yourself, Jolly."

"Look after *yourself,* sir." Jolly coughed. "I shall hope to see you back very soon. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," said Rollison.

He looked at the telephone for a few seconds before putting it back on its

cradle, thinking of a girl who was psychic and who believed him to be in acute danger now. His back was towards the door, as he turned on his side to make himself more comfortable. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled faintly, rejecting the uncanny, trying to see through the girl's story to the motives which lay behind it.

Then he turned round.

Downing stood in the doorway, covering him with a gun; grinning.

Chapter Sixteen

Sam Downing

Downing's was the kind of grin that wouldn't relax, the grin of a man who hated and who intended to kill. He closed the door softly behind him; the click as it latched sounded very loud. He had a picklock in his left hand, and dropped it into his pocket. He moved two or three cat-like paces forward. He was dressed in a brown overcoat which made him look more of a barrel than ever. The great physical strength of the man was obvious. He had a flat forehead, wide-set eyes and a big but flattened chin; it made his head look as broad as it was long.

His big hand dwarfed the automatic.

"So you've an interesting appointment tonight, have you? With the Count. And you're afraid you *might* miss the bus. You'll miss it all right—*and* the appointment. I didn't think I'd take long to deal with you."

Rollison settled back on his pillows.

"Hallo, Sam," he said.

"Being smart won't help you." The grin remained as Downing talked; his face was almost as mask-like as Madame Thysson's – but a satyr's mask. "When I learned that the Count was thinking of playing ball with you, I did some quick thinking. There's just one way to deal with slugs like you, Rollison. Rub them out. See?"

"I see, Sam. May I have a cigarette."

"No, you can't."

"Not even the condemned man's last privilege?"

"I'm not an ordinary executioner," Downing said. "I'm glad you know you've had it. Keep your hand away from that telephone, too."

Rollison said: "All right, Sam."

A wave of weariness swept over him, and took away all the joy of living. He had been in many tight corners, but never one like this; never one in which death was so inevitable. Here was a man who hated; who had come only to kill; who had him completely at his mercy. No pleading and no bribing would serve a purpose, now; no tricks could turn the tables on the man who stood like a solid block, ten feet away, and with the gun unwavering in his hand.

Downing wanted time only for one thing; to gloat.

"Saying your prayers?" he sneered.

"In my own way," Rollison said. Even if he started to get up, he wouldn't have a chance. His gun was in his coat pocket; he had taken it for granted that there would be no danger today; that there was an armistice until he saw de Vignon. He'd forgotten Sam; or rather, forgotten that Downing would have his own hate motive.

"Well, be quick about it," Downing said. "I've hated your guts for years,

Rollison, but I didn't think I'd ever be able to finish you off myself. It'll be nice and simple, see—de Vignon will get the blame."

"He won't like that, Sam."

"I don't care what he likes. I've finished with de Vignon. I've done all his dirty work for him in London for a couple of years. Why, it was doing a job for de Vignon that I got my last stretch! Now he turns on me—blames me for what you did in London. Calls me a fool, says I don't know the first thing about you. Maybe I don't. *He* never will. Curtains for the Toff!"

He laughed – and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The faint click sounded, clear, not loud. Downing's eyes dropped, he moved the gun up, taken completely by surprise at this failure. Rollison twisted, grabbed a pillow and raised it. Downing pointed the gun again, his fat finger squeezed; and there was another *click!*

Rollison flung the pillow.

Downing threw the gun, and the missiles met in mid-air and dropped between the two men. Rollison leaned out of bed and grabbed at his coat. Downing leapt at him, kicked against the pillow and stumbled. Rollison felt his gun and pulled it out – and the door banged open.

A man called in French: "Stop that, Downing*!"*

Downing ignored the order. As he levelled the gun Rollison saw two of de Vignon's bodyguards. His mind worked swift as light. De Vignon had expected this, had taken the bullets out of Downing's gun, had sent his own bodyguard to save Rollison from harm. All that went through his mind as Downing came at him, and the men behind called out harshly. The gun was in Rollison's hand. Downing couldn't harm him physically, but if he were taken prisoner and hauled back to de Vignon, M'sieu le Comte would use pressure to make him talk. Not that Downing would need much persuasion to repeat what he had heard of the telephone conversation; and it would be enough to make de Vignon doubt the story he had heard from the *Sûreté.*

Downing smashed a blow at his face. Rollison felt little as he moved his head, but heard Downing's fist smack against the metal of the head-panel. Downing hid the others from sight, but they were almost on to him, in a moment would drag him off.

Rollison fired.

The shot sounded deafening; there was hardly a flash, because the muzzle was so close to Downing's body. Downing's eyes opened spasmodically, his mouth opened too; then they closed and he slumped forward.

De Vignon's men stood back. There was a tiny wisp of smoke from Rollison's gun.

The two men, who had obtained a master key from a maid, had taken Downing away. Rollison didn't try to guess how they would get him out of the hotel. He felt the sickness of reaction. He had never liked killing and

certainly had not liked this one. Probably no one would know that it had been done in cold blood; that he had killed Downing to make sure that he would be able to continue his work with de Vignon. There was plenty of reason and ample excuse, and Downing was a murderer; but he felt sick.

He stood in the bathroom, watching the top of the sheet soaking in the hand-basin. The water was bright red; there had been little bleeding before Downing had been lifted off him, and it had all gone on to the sheet; the evidence would soon be gone. He wrung it out, soaked it again for a few minutes, then felt satisfied that it was clean enough not to rouse anyone's suspicions that it was blood. He wrung as much water out of it as he could, and spread it over the bath. Then he changed his mind, took it back to the bed and threw half a cup of cold coffee over it, making sure that the sheet was soiled. He shivered and started to dress.

Presently there was a tap at the door.

He looked up, and his heart began to race. Had that shot been heard? Could anyone near have failed to hear it?

"Come in," he called.

A woman said: "The door is locked."

He recognised the voice, went across and opened the door, and forced a smile.

Mademoiselle "Blanc" came in, smiling. She looked exactly as she had when she had left him last night; radiant and ravishing. The spiritless obedience to everything he had ordered had been a clever act. She wore a dark-red suit and waist-length mink coat.

"Now we can really be ourselves," she said.

"Wonderful," said Rollison. The word almost choked him. He had to snap out of this mood. He couldn't trust himself to talk freely to the girl, to answer the questions which would be in her words, whether they seemed like questions or not. "Superb!" he said, and drew her nearer, put his arms round her and kissed her savagely. For a moment she was rigid; then she seemed to melt.

At last he let her go.

She laughed, a little breathlessly.

"I do not feel so safe, now."

She opened her handbag and handed him a small red handkerchief. He took it, looked into the mirror, and saw the red smear at his lips, very like blood. He laughed; and laughter did him good. He didn't try to stop himself, but went on, wiping his lips at the same time. He could see the girl's reflection in the mirror, and she was smiling, as if delighted.

He finished.

"Thanks. But is once enough?"

"At midday, yes, I think so," she said, and her eyes mocked him. "You are truly a remarkable man."

"Judging from one kiss? I—"

"No, no." She went across to the chair and sat on the arm; and her movements had a subtle, willowy grace, everything about her was seductive.

“Anyone who can kill a man one moment and laugh and make love the next —that is what M’sieu le Comte would really call a *man.”*

“I see. But Downing would have killed me.” He didn’t ask her how she knew about the shooting, but finished dressing, taking great care with his collar and tie. His head was muzzy,-but he already felt the good effect of the potion which Latimer had brought him; and it was time he had another. He went to the bathroom and took it. The girl hadn’t moved when he returned. “And he was in our way, my dear.”

“And in the Count’s way. Did you know that you owed the Count your life?”

“I thought he had something to do with it.”

“There was a quarrel. The Count thought that Downing would come here, in anger, and removed the bullets from his gun. But for that—” She broke off. “I think you understand that, as well as one other thing, Richard.”

“Not fair,” he said.

She frowned. “I do not understand.”

“My Richard to your what?”

The frown cleared, and she laughed gaily. She came across and gripped his hands, put her cheek against his, and whispered: “*Yvonne,* Richard!”

“And what’s the other thing you think I understand?”

She drew back and pouted, making herself provocative, and yet he could see that she was assessing him shrewdly; she was older than he had thought at first.

“Are you so slow? This is a fine city, Richard, and the police are very good—sometimes. They would not like to think that two Englishmen quarrelled in a Paris hotel, and one killed the other. It is true, there is no evidence now, but—the body, it will be found if necessary. And the bullet in it. And the bullet will be found to have come from your gun. You understand?”

Rollison laughed. “Forget it.”

“I don’t think you should forget, Richard.” What is the death of Downing between friends? M’sieu le Comte can keep the body and use it as a threat. Why should that worry me? We’re going to work together, aren’t we?”

“M’sieu le Comte is so anxious you should not forget that,” said Yvonne Blanc.

Last night he had thought Blanc was an assumed name; now, he doubted it. There was Marcel Blanc, awaiting trial in London; and while it was a common name and could be a coincidence, he didn’t think that was likely. There was a family likeness between Marcel and Yvonne, and each worked for the Count.

“I’ve a good memory, when I need it,” Rollison said. “Did they get the body away safely?”

“But of course. They used a large basket, but such details, they do not matter.”

“Good. And why have you come to see me?”

“Just to remind you that there are some things you must not forget,” she

said. “And one of them is that M’sieu le Comte expects you to do what he requires. He will require to see you, at the Rue de l’Arbre, at half-past six—”

“I see.” Rollison patted his coat into position, and refilled his cigarette-case from a box which Jolly had put in with his luggage. “Mistake number one, Yvonne—not at half-past six, half-past seven or any time tonight or any other night. I’ve paid my first and last visit to the Love Club.”

He beamed at her. He felt better and was almost himself; shock and the physic probably shared the responsibility for that. He relished the frown which wrinkled her forehead, and stopped her from looking just a lovely young woman.

She waited for him to go on.

“That’s all,” said Rollison.

“You say you will not see him?”

“Oh, no,” said Rollison. “Just that I won’t meet M’sieu le Comte at the Rue de l’Arbre. If I’m to be any use, I mustn’t be seen there again. He must meet me somewhere else, and if he’s wise, it will be somewhere he isn’t likely to be known, or where everyone’s discretion can be relied on. Your turn to understand.” He proffered cigarettes. She didn’t take one, but was smiling again.

“And we shall meet soon—and often, yes?”

“Very often,” said Rollison, and there was a glint in his eyes. “I don’t think you’re safe here. *Au revoir.”*

“Au revoir. But wait! I nearly forgot the most important message. M’sieu le Comte will be engaged tonight, the meeting will be tomorrow. He needs more time to make inquiries, I believe. *Au ’voir* again!”

She laughed, and turned to the door. Rollison reached it ahead of her, and watched her go to the lift. He went back, frowning. He was glad of a day’s respite; but de Vignon could use that killing against him, a development he hadn’t considered in that tense moment of decision.

He had left the gun under his pillow, a little factor that de Vignon had forgotten. He pulled the pillow aside.

The gun wasn’t there.

Neither de Vignon nor Yvonne would forget anything that mattered.

Chapter Seventeen

Dinner With The Count

A closed car drew up outside the *Hôtel Mulle* and the chauffeur sprang out. He opened the door as Rollison stepped from the hotel. It was exactly six-thirty; a message had said that the car would arrive at that time. The streets were dark, but the night was fine. Rollison sat back against luxurious upholstery, and had room to stretch out his legs. He felt physically much better, although his head was tender, and a few of the bruises were still painful when touched. Nothing of interest or excitement had happened since Yvonne had gone the previous day. A disgruntled Latimer had called in, to say that he had been detailed to a job by his London office, and hadn't been back.

Rollison had taken it easy for twenty-four hours, and had lunched lightly.

The car slid swiftly along quiet roads, only now and again merging with thick and noisy traffic. Suddenly the blinds at the side and back windows dropped, operated without warning by the driver. That was when they were nearing a built-up area, which Rollison hadn't identified. The driver had taken so many twists and turns that Rollison wasn't sure what district he was in; in London, no trick like that could have fooled him.

They drove for twenty minutes.

When the car stopped, he was inside a courtyard, something like that which led to Madame Thysson's. The doors behind were being closed by a man in uniform. Another uniformed man stood at a doorway leading to a wide flight of stairs. The light was poor, but when Rollison drew closer to the stairs he saw that the "uniform" was livery; these were flunkeys, even to their white gloves. He hid a smile as he was taken up the stairs by one man, who did not speak; they reached a wide landing. Everywhere was spaciousness and opulence. A door, standing open, showed a ballroom, with three huge chandeliers.

Rollison was taken along a side passage, carpeted in deep red, then into a small, exquisitely furnished room. Everything here was genuine Louis Quinze. It was more like an exhibition room than one in which human beings lived and took their ease.

His hat, coat and stick were taken away from him, and he was left alone again. When the doors closed, there was no sound. He was beginning to get impatient when the door opened and de Vignon appeared.

"My friend, how good to see you!" This time he came with outstretched hand. It was a hard hand, and gripped tightly. He was dressed in a lounge suit which fitted perfectly, appeared to ooze wealth; and, he would like to think, had an aristocratic air. Rollison studied him dispassionately. It would be easy to underrate this man; he was handsome in a striking, unusual way, and a man of mental as well as physical strength. The reflection itself was

absurd; only a brilliant man could have won his position in Paris and, in spite of his reputation, be immune from the law.

He linked arms with Rollison.

"I was delayed just for a few minutes, I had intended to be here to welcome you."

He led the way into the next room, a large one with a dining-table large enough to hold twenty people; two places were laid, a flunkey stood behind each chair. Rollison glanced about him, and had difficulty in concealing his surprise; for there was gold plate. He was dreaming, this wasn't really gold plate glistening beneath the light of two chandeliers, or could it be?

It was.

De Vignon would expect a comment.

"You've taken a hundred years off my age," murmured Rollison.

His host was delighted.

"I thought perhaps you would appreciate it, my friend. And I also felt that you would be happy to dine alone with me. We have so much to discuss." He rested a hand on Rollison's shoulder. "I have excellent news about you!"

"Good," murmured Rollison.

"I did not know that such a man as you existed," said de Vignon. "I thought that there was no rival to me in Europe! But "—he laughed—" you have some idea, now, of what I think of the police. They have the same opinion of you, in London, as the fools here have of me, in Paris. Police!" He snapped his fingers. "Nothing can be denied a clever man."

"Why should it be denied him?" said Rollison.

They sat down, and a flunkey above all flunkeys came from double doors, each opened by a lesser creature, and the feast began.

Rollison sat back in an easy chair trimmed with gold brocade, smoked a small cigar, and looked into the reflection of the leaping log fire in the large bowl of the brandy glass. He felt no desire to move or speak, and de Vignon seemed touched by the same lethargy. It was two hours since Rollison had arrived; two fantastic hours.

He breathed: "This is the life."

"The only life," agreed de Vignon. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright; he had regained his slow, deliberate way of speaking, but now appeared to have to consider each word with even more care. "Not possible, I believe, in England."

Rollison put up a hand: "Let's not talk about that."

"But possible here," murmured de Vignon. He sniffed the bouquet of the brandy, and lowered the glass. "Rollison, I have friends in many places. The loudest voice in the world is money. Yesterday and today, I have heard remarkable stories about your activities in London, and the police at Scotland Yard—" He gave a beatific smile. "How they dislike you."

"Fools," said Rollison, negligently.

"I have also received word from other friends, on the staffs of the great newspapers, and it is evident that you have created a fine reputation."

“Robin Hood,” murmured Rollison. “Don Quixote. All that kind of rubbish.”

“But profitable. And yet,” went on de Vignon, “you have little opportunity for good living in England. Now in France, with a romantic people whose imagination can be fired by one man, it would be different. I confess, I am not well liked by most people. I have not the personality, only the organising mind. Now you—people take quickly to you, my friend, I have already discovered that. You could become popular in a very short time. Your French is excellent, and—” He paused, and looked dreamily at his glass again.

“Nice of you,” said Rollison politely.

“Now there are so many political squabbles, so much uncertainty, an unhappy and dejected people—not all, but many of them.” De Vignon belched slightly. “They will respond to a magic touch. I have myself asked, how could you best work with me. And—”

Rollison opened his eyes a little wider.

“You will agree that I am cunning,” said de Vignon, beaming at his own virtues. “This far, my friend. At first, I believed what Downing told me about you. That was why I attacked you on the road, why I wanted you to return to London—to be killed, on the way! Then” – he was very frank – “you told me about Downing’s grudge against you, and—I thought perhaps I had been wrong. So, I removed the bullets from Downing’s gun!”

“I see,” murmured Rollison.

“Now I have studied the reports received about you from London,” said the Count. “You have won a great reputation by appearing to befriend the poor, the outcasts, the down-and-outs of London. Yes?”

“Poor dupes,” said Rollison.

“Exactly the word, my friend, but regard the way in which they have assisted you. You are so popular with the *demi-monde* and in the poor districts of London that the police are handicapped. You have the poor championing you—I understand aright?”

Grice and Poincet, between them, had worked miracles.

“I think you could say that,” conceded Rollison.

“Wonderful, my friend! Now with the people behind one, what cannot a man do? I confess that although I am wealthy and live as a man should live, I am confined to certain limits” – de Vignon shrugged. “I have an organisation without a heart—without sympathy. I am dispassionate and honest with myself, and see what is required. If it were possible for a man to become a favourite among the rich *and* poor of Paris, as you are in London, he would climb to power. I cannot do that. You would need to be launched on Paris society, and that will be simple. I can trust you” – he smiled broadly – “because you would not wish to betray a man who could prove you killed Downing! Also, when you are famous, you will champion the cause of the poor.”

“Aiming at what, in particular?” asked Rollison, who still looked nonchalant, but no longer felt it.

“But my friend!” de Vignon leaned forward earnestly. “I confess that—I have some wealth and an efficient organisation and yet there are difficulties. I must always be on my guard against the authorities. There are people beyond my influence, many of them wealthy. Now if you were to be accepted by them, and then suggest a great effort for charity, a stupendous effort, perhaps a *Bal Masqué,* you would have many of the wealthy on your side. A rich man likes to receive some value for his gifts. You would become a distinguished, popular public figure. Then you would find out, and I would assist you, where the rich have their weaknesses. We could exert a little pressure. Do not misunderstand me, my friend, you would simply obtain the information, I would see to all the rest. And on the other side, in the underworld itself, you would become an influence. You would have many friends who would talk freely of the big criminals and their coups. We would be in the market for stolen jewels, organise a cutting and re-setting workshop and, through you and others, sell the jewels back to their owners. It is already done on a small scale, but not properly organised or exploited. You agree?”

“A marvellous conception,” purred Rollison.

“We would then spread our activities, in marry spheres. We would organise crime so that I see nothing less,” declared de Vignon, “than the greatest illegal organisation in Europe!”

“So,” murmured Rollison.

“Influence everywhere, power in many places, what is in America called protection racket; all these and other things—we would be kings.”

Rollison considered. “What about the queens?”

“Already there is a woman who has tried to put this into practice. A woman!” de Vignon sneered, and for the first time since Rollison had arrived, his voice hardened, as with hate. “A Madame Thysson, who—”

“Ah, yes,” said Rollison. “I’ve heard of her.” He touched the bruises on his forehead. “I won those, trying to get information from her. Quite a woman if she hadn’t worn a mask.”

The hardness went out of de Vignon’s voice, he chuckled and oozed goodwill.

“I am glad you told me of that, my friend. I heard that she received a visitor, and believed that it was you. Immediately I knew that you were a man of exceptional calibre. Tell me, why did you go there?”

“Shock tactics,” said Rollison. “I had heard about the lady, and Odette mentioned her.” He dropped the name Odette out gently. “There are such great possibilities in Paris, and I wanted to make a deep impression quickly.”

“You succeeded,” said de Vignon. “I doubt whether Madame Thysson has received such a shock in all her life. But you need not pay too much attention to her in future, when the time is ripe I can move against her.”

Rollison’s eyebrows shot up.

“I am *quite* sure,” said de Vignon. “And you can assist. She is known to be extremely fond of Odette Rivière. You must make sure that Odette is kept

safe—we can use her to exert pressure on Madame Thysson."

"I see," said Rollison. "She is quite safe."

"Good! Now, our only urgent problem is to launch you on Paris." He chuckled. "I shall play little part in that myself, but you will have all the help you require. It will be dependent chiefly on your own personality and position, and I am *not* troubled about that. Now, my friend, more brandy?"

"Not now," pleaded Rollison.

"I wish that I could spend the rest of the evening with you," said de Vignon, "but there is some business I must attend to. One thing—are you wise to stay at a second-rate hotel like the *Mulle?*"

"As a poor Englishman—"

"I will arrange a suite for you at the *Splendide,* where I am not without influence," promised de Vignon.

The same closed car took Rollison back to the *Hôtel Mulle.* He did not know what part of Paris he had visited, and at that stage, did not greatly care. Poincet could almost certainly tell him when he needed to know. He was greeted with respect by the staff, went along to his own room, and flung off his gloves and coat. He stood in the middle of the room, scowling. There was a message on his dressing-table; Latimer would be busy on his special assignment all this evening. A good thing; Rollison preferred to be alone.

He felt stifled; contaminated.

He went out again, walked some distance and made sure that he was not followed, then caught a bus from the Place de l'Opera and stood with the crowd on the swaying platform at the back. Like most of the single-decker buses in Paris the bus was crowded to overflowing. He rubbed shoulders with ordinary men and women, who glanced at him furtively or openly, and watched the countless little cafés with gaily lighted windows, felt the wheels bumping over the cobbles of side streets, and gradually felt less stifled.

He got out, near the funicular railway in Montmartre, and walked up the steps to the Church of the Sacred Heart. He leaned against the parapet, and saw Paris, a sea of myriad twinkling lights, stretched out in front of him. The stars above seemed pale and tiny, the lights below large, warm and friendly.

A beggar approached him, slowly, without speaking; dumb. He dropped a five-hundred-franc note into the outstretched palm, and received an incoherent blessing. He turned and went into the church, and saw the glowing candles, fifty or sixty people praying, including three old women, dressed in black, who were maintaining the never-ending prayer which had gone on, in relays, unbroken for many years. He walked round, slowly, and then came out and looked over Paris again. Staring towards the glowing lights in the centre of the city, he seemed to see a face materialise out of the faint mistiness; de Vignon's. It was like an obscene deity, gloating over helpless victims.

He turned away abruptly and walked swiftly until an empty taxi drew level. Half an hour later, he was walking through the narrow streets of

Montmartre. Little groups stood at the corners, talking in undertones, and most stopped as he passed. The *bistros* were half-empty. He turned into the mean streets of private dwellings, and heard music coming from many radios, children crying, talking, laughing. He came upon a large building with the door open and poor light inside, went in and was stopped by a little man in shirt sleeves who spoke rapidly in *argot.* There was no room, the house was full up.

"I want to look round," said Rollison, and walked past the startled man. He found himself in a large room, which stank of sweat and cooking. Round the walls were single beds, with only a little space between each. At the far end was a big, round iron stove, with men huddled about it. Some were cooking, others sat on their beds, miserable if warm, hungry-looking. Several came across, cringing, begging. He went out suddenly, and some cursed him for no reason at all. Fifty yards along, a small shop was open. He bought cheese, bread, butter and tinned foods from a little man and a big woman who fell over themselves to fill the order as it became huge.

"Now, a big basket, please," said Rollison. "You can have it back."

"Yes, m'sieu, at once!"

They needed three large baskets.

The big woman took one, the little man a second and Rollison the third, and Rollison led the way back to the doss-house. The attendant gasped as they appeared. The mutter of conversation increased as they went in, and the men stood back, dazed, not yet even hopeful. He called out, almost wildly: "Now catch, all of you, stand round and catch!" He began to toss the food into grasping hands. The shopkeepers caught on; after the first scrambling voices were raised as men clutched the food. *Merci, m'sieu. Merci, merci, merci!* There seemed to be a thousand voices in a great crescendo.

He went out, leaving a card with the attendant, who hugged three tins and a paper packet to him. There was a drawing on the card but no name or address. He hurried along, with half a dozen people trailing him, including a well-dressed woman. In ten minutes he came upon a hospital. He went in and asked for the Children's Ward, and persuaded a nurse to take him there. He walked up and down the ward, where most were asleep, but some were awake, in pain. A woman sitting near one cot watched him, the nurse went to a restless child, then returned to Rollison. A third woman stood by the door. This was the woman who had followed him from the doss-house.

"How can I help you?" asked the nurse.

"How can I help *you*?"

The nurse smiled. In the subdued light, she looked comely but careworn.

"In many ways. These are mostly orphan chilren you understand, and—"

"Toys? Books?"

"Both, and all would be welcome."

"I'll have them sent." He hesitated, then took out his wallet and thrust a wad of notes into her hand. "Better still, you buy them." He added a card and went out, to be greeted by the group which had followed him and was now waiting round the doorway. He laughed at them and they laughed with

him, touched by his reckless mood of extravagance. The well-dressed woman, who had come as far as the ward, was among them. He walked along, with less furious energy now, until gradually the followers disappeared ; but one was still behind him.

His mood changed.

Footsteps, soft and insistent, were there all the time. He did not look round, did not know whether it was a man or woman. He dodged across the road and turned a corner; the footsteps came on, whoever was following made no attempt at concealment. He went on, stopping a few yards past a corner *bistro.*

A woman passed it.

He waited for her, and she knew he was waiting and slowed down. It was almost dark. He could see that she was young, placed her as the woman he had seen in the Children's Ward. She drew up.

"You wish to see me, madame?"

"To tell you, sir, that you did much good tonight; *much* good. I inquired of the people who were waiting for you, and they told me what you had done before. What caused you to do it?"

Her voice was quiet, firm and pleasant.

"Pity?" Rollison made that a suggestion more than a statement.

"Perhaps," she said. "If you would do more good, there are those who can tell you where it is most needed. It is not that you are drunk," she added, "it could be a generous impulse, but—why should an impulse die?"

"Why, indeed," said Rollison. "I am staying at the *Hôtel Mulle.* Will you come and see me?"

"I live at this address." She pressed a slip of paper into his hand. "Will you come to see me? Soon."

She turned, and walked away.

Chapter Eighteen

Grooming

Latimer was in the hall of the hotel when Rollison returned, a little after midnight, and got up from a chair in the small lounge.

"Hallo," said Rollison. "How's my conscience?"

"I wouldn't know. Aren't you familiar with it?"

"I've given it to your keeping," said Rollison. "After tonight, it isn't safe with me." They went upstairs.

"So it went off well?"

"Magnificently," said Rollison. "Gold plate and gourmandising. I don't complain about his chef. De Vignon sees himself as a petty king, a kind of King of the Underworld. Clear case of schizophrenia. He is at one time a simple, sordid rogue with an itch for other people's money, and at others a true descendent of the great family of de Vignon, holding court. He knows that he'll never hold the traditional court again, and wants to build himself up as a private tyrant."

"And Madame Thysson stands in his way," said Latimer.

"Sure?"

"That's the rumour, and there's likely to be war to the knife between them," said Latimer. "She's false Queen to his Pretender. How did you really get on?"

"I think I sold myself. He doesn't trust me as much as he would like me to think he does, yet, but we're half-way there. I am to be groomed as a Court favourite, launched upon the rich of Paris, turned into everybody's darling, and at the same time, make myself popular with the poor and needy. I've started that already. I gave myself over to an orgy of pity, and incidentally met—" He hesitated, groped in his pockets, and drew out the slip of paper. It was in fact a thin card, with more than the woman's name and address printed on it. He read aloud: *"The Good Society*—Sister Marie. Know anything about the society which calls itself good?"

"I've a vague feeling that I've heard something about it," Latimer said.

"Could you find out some more?"

"It seems a safer job than most you've given me," said Latimer. "Yes, old chap, but not tonight, I'm almost asleep on my feet. Shall we say by midday tomorrow?"

"Fine, thanks."

Latimer, whose eyes were red-rimmed and glassy, and whose droll look had almost gone, stared at him thoughtfully, and slowly shook his head.

"Now what?" asked Rollison.

"Something's happened to you. You look like a mixture of devil and saint. I wouldn't like to be on the side of you that belongs to the Devil. Anything really happened?"

"I had a look into the cess-pit," said Rollison. "And soon I shall be moving to the *Splendide,* where you will have to pay a small fortune to speak to me. You get off for some sleep, old chap, don't mind me. Jolly would call this one of my exalted moods. I don't know what gets into me, it's something to do with that conscience."

"Here and now, I refuse to be its guardian," said Latimer. "Good night."

He was on the telephone at half-past ten next morning, obviously fresh and eager and interested. Rollison hadn't yet been out, but felt fit enough to go and challenge half the world.

"Rolly?"

"Yes, Pete."

"This Society—how did you strike it?"

"It struck me. Why?"

"It's quite a thing. I knew I'd heard of it before, but it's not exactly big news. A kind of Salvation Army, modern version. No, not a religious organisation, just a group of people who think their duty is to do good amongst the evil. It started during the war, as a kind of relief movement to the worst sufferers during the occupation, then nearly died out, but started again some three years ago. It has a first-class reputation, gets a lot of support from most people with consciences, but is hamstrung through lack of funds."

"Not enough people with consciences."

"That's right. Like you." Latimer was sardonic again. "It's an anonymous organisation. The actual missionary work, to give it a name, is done by women, mostly young women, who are known only by their Christian names. That address you have is a branch office. If you go there, you won't get the real names of the people you see—Sister Marie, Sister Sophie, Sister this, that or the other, anyhow. But there's one thing you ought to be warned about."

"That sounds like business."

"It is. Don't play the fool with it. One way and another, it's managed to win the affection of a lot of people. If a man like de Vignon got a grip on it and started to corrupt it—"

"I know," said Rollison. "I'll give it a miss, for a while. Anything in the way of news?"

Latimer chuckled. "Poincet has heard about your doings last night. He's good. You've suddenly become a figure in low society."

"That's me," said Rollison. "Nothing if not a good mixer. What are you going to do today?"

"I'm free."

"Then make friends with all the gossip columnists and Society editors. Try to get me a build-up. The Toff among the lowly and Milord Rollison in the *haut monde.* You'll have plenty of help from both sides, but I imagine that some papers will bar anything de Vignon tries to do."

"They will."

"Try to de-bar them," said Rollison.

"After the last two days, I've stopped saying that anything is impossible," said Latimer.

Three days later, he rang up to say that he had done his best, and thought Rollison would get a good Press. He himself had been recalled to London, but would rely on being called back here for any big move.

"Cross my heart," promised Rollison.

Those Parisians and Parisiennes who were interested in the antics and activities of the monied, the famous and the notorious in all of the worlds that mattered, soon discovered the existence of M. Richard Rollison. Most of what they read was true. That the younger son of an English peer had come to live in Paris. That in England he had a great reputation for charitable work. That in Paris he had been readily accepted as an ornament of Society. Night after night, he was high on the list of distinguished guests at this ball, that dinner, or at an exclusive private party. He was a superb dancer; he was remarkably handsome; he had unusual charm; he was unmarried, eligible.

Within two weeks, his photograph had been in most of the newspapers and several of the shiny weeklies, three times his name had been linked, casually, with those of ladies of fashion and renowned beauty. There were paragraphs which described how he had visited this *salon,* that shop, this restaurant or that night club. By then, too, his visits to the poor districts, and his generosity there, were becoming widely known. By the end of the third week, it was difficult for him to go anywhere without being pointed out and waited upon with a mixture of flattery and obsequiousness which was remarkable for a man who spent, comparatively, little money. Doors closed to many, opened to him as by magic. Houses which de Vignon could never aspire to enter, readily gave him hospitality. He became friendly with ex-Ministers, which was easy, for there were so many, and present-day Ministers, which was little more difficult. He was vouched for by the British Embassy, which gave him an unfair advantage over many people. In every kind of company, he scintillated; with everyone, he appeared to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

He received messages of congratulations from de Vignon, but did not see him again.

One of the messages suggested that Rollison should inaugurate a *Bal Masqué*; only he, de Vignon said, could obtain the use of a ballroom at one of the great palaces. If he were to try—

Rollison tried, and succeeded, and the project hit the headlines.

Often, in the early evening, he descended upon the poorer districts and repeated his performance of that first night, always leaving a card behind him. Just as his reputation had grown in the East End of London, so it grew in Paris; but faster. The grooming and the build-up continued into the fifth week, without a serious pause. More and more references were made about the *Bal Masqué.* Ladies of experience volunteered their services, Rollison paid for the professional organisers. Two newspapers took it up in a big

way.

Rollison telephoned Jolly each day.

Odette was still staying at the flat. She said very little, and spent most of her time reading or doing needlework, Jolly having produced the necessary materials. The Frenchman was no longer watching every day, but occasionally walked up and down Gresham Terrace; his interest hadn't waned. Marcel Blanc was to stand trial at the Old Bailey, early in the New Year. Evidence that Sam Downing had been in the vicinity on the night of Lady Murren's murder had been found, but – Jolly was careful to say – there had been no hint that Downing's whereabouts was known. Grice had stopped visiting the flat or sending a man. There had been no attempt to interfere with Odette, no one had shown any interest in her. Marcel Blanc had to rely on Court legal aid; he appeared to have neither money nor friends. He had not yet made a statement, and, as far as Jolly knew, had kept absolutely silent; the police believed that he was too frightened to talk.

Exactly five weeks after Rollison had left London, Jolly finished a brief telephoned report, and then said: "I read a great deal about you in the papers, sir."

"Waste of space," said Rollison. "You ought to read *le Figaro."*

"I have arranged for the delivery of the Paris papers," said Jolly. "Miss Odette also reads them, and she has been more ready to talk recently, and follows your—ah—career with very close interest."

"Keep trying to find out if she can tell you anything else," said Rollison. "Anything new, it doesn't matter what, about Madame Thysson,"

"She has nothing to add," said Jolly. "I have quite failed to persuade her to enlarge upon the subject."

"Keep trying. And look after yourself."

"I wish I felt that you were as secure as I," said Jolly.

Rollison laughed as he rang off.

He looked round the huge room in the suite at the *Splendide;* the Royal Suite, and opulence. There were four rooms, and he used two of them. He had already given two cocktail parties, to carefully selected "friends" – the names provided by a list sent to him by de Vignon. They were likely to be early victims. One room was used by the organisers of the Ball.

The telephone bell rang again. He stretched out his hand. It might be from any one of a hundred people.

"Hallo."

"Hallo, Richard!" It was Yvonne Blanc, whose voice was unforgettable. "How long is it since I heard you?"

"Too long," Rollison said promptly.

She gurgled. "You will always say the right thing. And *do* the right thing. I congratulate you, m'sieu. There are other suggestions which I think will interest you, if you can spare the time from your all-conquering progress to dine with me."

"*Tête-à-tête?"* asked Rollison.

Her laughter flowed so easily.

“Yes, no one else will be with us. I shall send a car for you, at half-past six. This time, there will be no gold plate!”

She rang off, giving him no time to comment. He felt his pulse quickening as he put down the receiver; that call had been like the bark of the long-awaited starter’s gun. For the past few days he had expected it almost hourly.

He had promised himself one indulgence before his next interview with de Vignon or an agent: a talk with Sister Marie.

He went out, took a taxi, gave the Church of the Sacred Heart as his destination until he was sure that he was not being followed.

It was a clear, cold day. The district was squalid, few people were about in the early afternoon, and the shops were mostly empty. He stopped his taxi at a corner of the street, paid it off, and was conscious of the inquisitive gaze of those who were about. He walked towards the house of Sister Marie. It was larger than most of the others in the street, and stood in its own small grounds; more a meeting place than a private house. On a board outside were just the words: *The Good Society—Sister Marie.* The door was open.

He went in, to find a large room, with benches along three walls; and on the benches, parcels of food, toys, old clothes, everything that might be found useful for the poor. Two elderly women were packing parcels. One came towards him, and when he asked for Sister Marie he was taken to a small, bare office at the far end of the hall.

“Wait, please, Sister Marie will soon see you.”

He sat on a wooden chair, studying the small desk on which were some manilla folders containing papers, an inkstand and a portable typewriter. There was another desk and, in all, eight chairs. The only thing on one wall was a calendar; on another was a big map of the district, marked with coloured pins. He stood up and studied it. There were red, yellow and black pins; he guessed that the black represented bad areas, the other colours districts where there was not so much need.

There was no comfort; only strict utility. There were two doors, one opposite him.

He heard a woman approaching from the big room, but she didn’t come in. He wondered if she would use the other door, but there was silence after a door closed. Then he heard muted voices. Already he had been here nearly fifteen minutes. He had patience in plenty, but wondered why he was being left alone. He began to feel uneasy, a feeling which he had not expected here.

Then the door opposite him opened, and a man stepped in: a man with a gun.

Chapter Nineteen

Invitation

Rollison's gaze dropped to the gun, then rose to look into the man's face. It was a smiling, rather pleasant face, and he had seen it before. The man had dark hair and a fresh complexion, a good, lean figure; he was probably in the early thirties.

Rollison had knocked him out, at Madame Thysson's house. The man said: "So we meet once more." He had seen Rollison in his disguise as an apache; yet now he identified him at once as the same man. That was almost as disconcerting as the gun. Rollison carried no weapon, except his stick; he had not expected any kind of trouble. He said: "Is Sister Marie engaged?"

"She asked me to see you, in her place."

"Too bad," said Rollison. "So she also works for Madame Thysson."

"That is so." The man was courteous, even affable. "There is a car waiting for us; will you have the goodness to come with me?"

"No," said Rollison.

The other's smile widened.

"It will be for your good, I assure you."

"Isn't that the Society's general claim?" Rollison didn't move.

"Where is Sister Marie?"

"She will see you later. I hope you will not compel me to use force. I have no thirst for vengeance, but have my instructions, which are to take you away from here. And I am not alone." He smiled towards the other door, which opened on his words. Another man, shorter and swarthy, came in; he kept his right hand in his pocket, where there was an ominous bulge, probably made by a gun. "Shall we go?"

"If you insist," said Rollison sadly.

"You are very wise. This way, please."

He turned and led the way, pocketing his gun; but the swarthy man followed, and the bulge still showed at his pocket. They went through narrow passages, into an open yard, where a battered Renault stood, once a car of distinction, now little more than a wreck. The young man opened the door, and stood aside for Rollison to pass.

If he were to resist, this was the moment.

He stepped inside. The younger man followed him, the swarthy man took the wheel. They turned out of the yard into the street, and half-way along, the blinds dropped over the windows. In the gloom, Rollison saw the other's smile.

"A little precaution."

"Common among thieves," said Rollison.

"You should know," the man said gently.

The car rattled noisily and swayed from side to side, and the driver

seemed to keep his foot on the accelerator, slowing down for no man. But for the lack of comfort, it was like the ride to see de Vignon. It took much longer. During one ten-minute spell there was no sound of other traffic except an occasional *swiiishhh* as a car passed them in the other direction; they were on the Paris outskirts, probably in the country. The coolness with which the thing had been done had an alarming efficiency: these people knew exactly what they wanted, and would be ruthless in getting it.

The car slowed down, then turned into a driveway and stopped.

"We will get out," said the young man amiably. "I congratulate you, milord." The "milord" was dryly sarcastic.

"Thanks. What about?"

"On your good sense."

"It's easy to be sensible when frightened," said Rollison.

"Frightened?" The other smiled, and full daylight shone upon him; he looked carefree and handsome. "You will be wise, then, to remain frightened, because Madame does not wish to injure you, but will, if it becomes necessary."

"So I am to see Madame?"

"You will see what you will see."

The house stood alone and isolated. Except for two rows of Normandy poplars on the skyline, and ploughed land, there was nothing in sight. The house itself was tall and ugly. Its plaster work had once been painted pink, but the colour had faded, and great pieces of plaster had fallen away, showing the bare bricks. Wooden shutters, fastened to the outside of the windows, needed painting. It was three stories high, and narrow; except for one low building that might be a garage, there were no outbuildings.

Inside, it was cold and bleak. There was a wide passage, a flight of narrow stairs, the walls needed distempering and there were damp patches. The driver had followed, and was close behind Rollison. The younger man led the way upstairs, and each tread creaked. On the first landing, there was a strip of threadbare carpet. Several doors led off this, all of them closed. Rollison was taken to one, at the back of the house, and his escort tapped.

"Come in," a woman said.

The door opened, the younger man bowed, with that touch of mockery, and stood aside.

Rollison went into a long, narrow room, furnished barely but with some comfort; and in the open grate was a blazing log fire. Near him, standing by a tall window, was Sister Marie. Farther away, at a desk, sat another woman; he could not be sure that he had seen her before, although undoubtedly he had seen the same mask.

Rollison said: "Still play-acting, *madame?"*

*"*I am taking the necessary precautions, Mr. Rollison," the woman said. It was the voice of Madame Thysson.

So they knew that; and anyone who had read the newspapers with any intelligence could hardly fail to recognise him.

"What is it you want?" asked Rollison.

"An explanation."

"Of what?"

"Your double life."

Rollison said: "Does it matter? Say that I have a conscience."

The mask didn't move, but he saw Sister Marie smile. She was older than he had first thought, a pale, serene-looking woman; perfect for her task of mercy.

"Very few friends of the Comte de Vignon are greatly troubled by a conscience." Madame Thysson placed a hand on the desk in front of her and the diamond ring sparkled. "Perhaps it will be an advantage if I tell you what I know of you, Mr. Rollison. You arrived some weeks ago, and visited M'sieu le Comte. On the same night, you came to see me. It appeared that your visit followed an incident in London, when you were of some assistance to a young girl, Odette. She remains at your address in London, I understand, and appears to be in excellent health. Why do you keep her?"

"She is too frightened to leave."

"Why do you frighten her?"

Rollison said dryly: "There is a difference between knowing and guessing."

"I am telling you what I know," said Madame Thysson. "It is that you realise the significance of that young girl, and are keeping her at your home against her will. What do you know of her?"

"That when you realised that I'd seen and talked to her, you didn't like it."

"I see." It was like a voice coming out of a machine; but a good voice. "Let me go on, Mr. Rollison. During the time that you have been in Paris, you have assisted the Good Society, and have dispensed much charity by yourself. You have spent a considerable sum—you will not, I trust, deny that."

"Should I?"

"You have left a card—one of these cards—wherever you have paid a visit." She picked up a card and showed it to him—just a plain card on one side, and the sketch without a face on the other; the Toff's visiting-card. "It does not have your name, there was nothing to suggest either on the card or in your appearance that you were the English gentleman who was gaining some attention in very different circles in Paris. But that was obviously true."

"Well?"

"You set out, m'sieu, deliberately to curry favour with the poor and to gain the confidence of the rich. And that began after you had met M'sieu le Comte, and after you had visited him at his private house, a favour granted to very few people."

"So you know everything," said Rollison, ironically.

"Nearly everything that matters, m'sieu. But I do not know, for certain, *why* you have done this. The obvious—" She shrugged. "It could be that you see a way of making a fortune. That seems likely, for an associate of M'sieu

le Comte. Most of your introductions came, in the first place, through friends of his. On the other hand, you have certain advantages which he has not, and you have already a wider circle of acquaintances. Why, m'sieu?"

Rollison looked peeved.

"I like *people,"* he said.

Madame Thysson took her hand from the desk and leaned back in her chair. The mask made her uncanny, robbed her of vitality, and yet could not take the menace out of her words.

"Mr. Rollison, understand this. You are not able to save yourself from injury and hurt. You know that I am quite prepared to cause you hurt. There are certain things that I wish to know, and I will find out, whatever method I have to adopt with you. There is no point in not understanding that."

"Oh, I know," said Rollison, and sounded almost gay. "Latest torture methods, all up to date. High-pressure blackmail, too. The lovely Madame Thysson, the Spider Maid of Paris. Doing good by stealth and running every racket there is. Not good. But you have a competitor. M'sieu le Comte doesn't see why you should have things all your own way. Nor do I." He laughed, and moved forward, pulled up a chair and sat down. He didn't know whether either of the men at the door had moved, but could imagine that they had gripped their guns suddenly. He lit a cigarette and looked into the mask, with its set smile and its lifelessness. "Why talk round it, madame? Why have war to the knife? Why not work together."

Sister Marie moved, suddenly, and took up a position near him, where she could look down and study him closely. He didn't glance at her.

"Please go on," said Madame Thysson.

"You've a mind. Use it. Paris is wide open to fraud, it's easy money and big money. You've gone one better than M'sieu le Comte, combining a kilogramme of good with a kilo of evil. But while you and de Vignon are at each other's throats, you'll only make danger for yourselves. Get together!"

"With you, perhaps, as liaison?"

"Why not?"

"Why have you detained Odette?" the woman asked sharply.

"Let's not talk about Odette, she will be all right, while you behave nicely. Let's talk about the possibilities of getting together in Paris. It's been done before, you know. One big ring, getting protection money from all the people who matter, blackmailing, cheating—crime with a capital C. You think you're big, but you're only playing with it. Get together with M'sieu le Comte."

She looked at him steadily, and he could just see her eyes, behind the empty mask sockets; they did not move. Sister Marie turned and went back to the window. Neither of the men shifted or made a sound.

"And did he send that message?"

"He did not! He hates your—well, he hates."

"With good cause," said Madame Thysson. "And how would you propose to dissolve that hatred?"

"Money melts most things."

"You have a peculiar philosophy, if not a unique one," said Madame Thysson. "I understand that you are to discuss the next stage in your relationship with M'sieu le Comte, tonight."

Rollison didn't speak.

"I have, you see, access to his confidential plans," she said, and it was easy to imagine her smiling again. "He is foolish enough to believe that he has access to mine, but he knows only what I want him to know. He is a fool but a dangerous fool, and there can be no peace between us. Nor is there room for a man like yourself to work with him. I had hoped that the discussion would have taken a different turn, but—" She broke off, and shrugged.

Rollison crossed his legs and leaned back on the chair. The woman looked at him steadily, and he felt the intent gaze of the others. He felt more; he could imagine that if Odette were here she would cry out there was danger. He felt much as he had done when Downing had appeared in his room; helpless. The methods were different, the kid glove was used smoothly, but the results were the same. He had only one card in his hand.

He said gently: "Poor Odette."

The effect was almost as great as when he had named the girl before.

Madame Thysson's hands clenched, Sister Marie drew a sharp breath.

"Why do you say that?"

"Just poor Odette," said Rollison. "Do you ever read the English papers, I wonder? Did you read about the murder of a certain titled lady? Lady Murren. She had many friends in France, including M'sieu le Comte. Her murder was sad and sickening. It happened on the night that Odette was in London. Her first night there. I wonder why Odette murdered her?"

"That is a lie."

Rollison's heart hammered. He took out his wallet and selected a photograph of the girl in London. He studied it with his head on one side, then said approvingly: "Nice. In fact, lovely. It would be a pity to see her hanged. My impression was of sweet innocence, bludgeoned into understanding the harsh realities of life. Someone didn't teach her properly."

He handed the photograph to Madame Thysson.

The woman took it with unsteady fingers.

"This child did not murder anyone."

"Of course, if the victim had been a man, Odette might have escaped on a plea of threatened virtue, but that wouldn't serve, would it? The evidence that Odette did kill Lady Murren is *very* strong. I keep in daily touch with my friends in London. They have instructions to take Odette and the evidence to the police, if I should fail to have my usual conversation. You are devoted to Odette, aren't you, madame?"

Chapter Twenty

The Ball

Sister Mark: sighed, as if she were in physical pain. Rollison smiled amiably into the face of the mask, leaned forward and stubbed out his cigarette on an empty ash-tray. The younger man walked forward, and stood close to Rollison's side. Rollison glanced up, and saw hatred on that face.

"I thought she might prove a trump card," said Rollison. "No Rollison, no Odette. Madame Thysson, you're not really cut out for a bad woman. You've had a long run. Retire. Leave crime to men who really know their business. Now de Vignon *is* bad. Between us—" He broke off, and shrugged. "Of course, if you would care to work with us, I think it might be arranged. Not now, but when this venom of hate has been dissolved. I wonder why you hate him as much as he hates you."

The woman said: "Odette did *not* kill that woman, or any person."

"Opinions differ. The evidence would support the case and satisfy even the strict English sense of justice. I know our police very well."

"You could not prove it against her."

"Oh, but I could. Would. Gladly. If you don't see reason. Which reminds me." Rollison glanced at his watch; it was nearly half-past three. "I have to be back in town by half-past five—you won't keep me too long, will you?"

He felt the cold wind sweeping into the car, and it stung his damp forehead. He had not expected to be allowed to leave, almost at once; he had used a trump card which had more power than he had expected. A mile or two from the house they had let him see where he was going. As he sat back, looking at the countryside which flashed by in the fading light, he went over all that had happened; he remembered the atmosphere of dread, after he had threatened to incriminate Odette. The girl held the key to the mystery; knowingly or unknowingly, he couldn't be sure.

He was sure of one thing: Madame Thysson and de Vignon were worlds apart, in spite of the similarity of their reputation.

They came to the suburbs, then drew near the heart of Paris, approaching from the Bastille district. He tapped on the glass in front of him, and the driver pulled up. He got out.

"This is far enough," he said, and thrust a five-hundred-franc note through the window. "Give my regards to madame."

The swarthy driver flung the note back at him, and the wind carried it along the pavement, then frisked it into the road. Rollison laughed. The car drove off, and Rollison walked on until he found a taxi; he was not followed. He left the taxi at a café not far from the offices of the *Sûreté Générale* and telephoned from the café; he found Poincet in.

"This is a certain Englishman," he announced.

“My friend! How unexpected and how great a pleasure! But should you telephone me like this?”

“I’m in a hurry. Where can we meet?”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Where are you?”

“At the Café Melisse, near you.”

“It could not be better,” said Poincet. “Go upstairs, ask for M. Melisse, and tell him that I am coming to see you. He will place a private room at your disposal.”

M. Melisse, a rotund man, was affability and helpfulness itself. Rollison waited for ten minutes in a cosy room, where a dozen could dine in comfort and where on the walls there were water-colours depicting food in all its culinary aspects. He heard footsteps on the stairs, and smiled when Poincet made an entry, much as he had done at the Restaurant des Truites. The detective placed his hand in Rollison’s.

“So now, you are in trouble.”

“It’s starting.”

“This Ball tomorrow night—”

“Never mind that, now,” said Rollison. “Why have you lied to me, M. Poincet?”

The Frenchman blinked, but was not offended. “M’sieu? In what way do I appear to have misled you?”

“You know. There isn’t much mystery about Madame Thysson.”

Poincet looked earnest. M’sieu, all Paris knows that there is.”

“Nearly all Paris. You don’t, for one. Who is Madame Thysson? What is she really doing? Why has she built up this criminal front?”

“So,” breathed Poincet, and sat down in a chair and looked sad. There was a pause, while a waiter brought wine, and then was waved away. Poincet sat and studied the bottle and the glasses. “So, you have discovered that Madame Thysson is not all she is supposed to be.”

“I’ve discovered that she is the leader of the Good Society, that much of the nonsense talked about her is false, that it would be a happier world with many more like her. I think you’ve helped to build up the story against her. I’ve checked with Latimer, and with some French newspapermen, and most of the evidence—evidence!—against her, comes from you or from your Department. Why?”

Poincet smiled vaguely.

“I am surprised,” he confessed. “I did not think you would find these results from your inquiries.”

“Isn’t it true?”

“Yes, I suppose one may say that it is true,” agreed Poincet. “Partly true. However, I have not betrayed you to Madame Thysson or her friends. She does not know you are working with my help.”

“Why keep it from her?”

“It is not necessary for her to know everything,” said Poincet. “Let me tell

you, that Madame Thys on is a woman with a mission. A strong sense of mission. It began during the war. She has developed a sense of the injustice of life, because—"

He shrugged. "She was closely related to a man who was not stirred by any sense of mission except his own aggrandisement. He was her husband. In fact, he still is, although they have not lived together for a long time, a very long time.

"The woman came to hate this man, who was so bad. There were collaborators for whom one could find excuses, but there were no excuses for him, and he betrayed many underground workers. He contrived, however, not to allow it to be proved that he had collaborated. He then began to run what you would call a racket, and his influence spread. The woman wished to destroy his influence. You can understand that it was not work which the police could do very easily. People who are being blackmailed do not resort to the police, and there are other difficulties. It was conceived by Madame Thysson, as she styled herself, that if she were to become unorthodox, she could succeed. Officially, I disapproved. But what, in fact, could I do? In every policeman there is a man, and men are sometimes wiser than rules and regulations permit. I did nothing, except to pass on the evidence against Madame Thysson to the newspapers. She provided the evidence—no, not the grounds, the rumours. Had there been evidence, I must have acted. She was very wise."

"By her rivalry, as it happened, she has greatly weakened de Vignon's organisation. She came to hate and work against all bad men. She is quite ruthless. I cannot be ruthless, I am a policeman, but as you have guessed so much it is right that you should know the rest."

"Thanks," said Rollison heavily.

"If I were a different man, I would perhaps say that you are not unique. What you have been to London for many years, Madame Thysson has been to Paris. But she has done more, much more. This Society, which she organised, does remarkable work. Remarkable! Until it acted, I had never believed that there was such a thing as a reformed criminal. Now, I know better. Much better. Oh, she is a remarkable woman. Men who will not work for the police, men who have been trained to regard the police as their natural enemy, will serve her. Is she not one of themselves? And so she has fought a battle against de Vignon, and there have been times when she has been near to winning it. But, my friend" – Poincet raised a hand, impressively – "but, my friend, de Vignon is also ruthless, clever and has great power. I have played cat and mouse, as you say, hoping that she would lure him into one big mistake."

"She has not, yet; but she has won much influence, and de Vignon knows that she is the leader of the Good Society. He sought to break it. He wants to find out her identity but she has hidden it from everyone. Or nearly everyone. Today, many people contribute towards the Good Society. How brilliant the conception of de Vignon, to offer an alternative, to divert from those channels money which will come to you, at the Ball and after. You

begin to see?"

"I see. And de Vignon still hasn't missed a step?"

"Please?"

"He hasn't made his fatal slip?"

"Not yet. Oh, we could pick up some of his minnows, but his big men and he himself—they still eat off gold plate. Benign providence does not make them choke. There are times when I would argue with providence. The hope, however, is that de Vignon will over-reach himself. Is that possible, perhaps?"

"Yes."

"How I admire you," breathed Poincet. "You are so confident." He poured wine, for the first time. "Now, you wish that I should acquaint Madame Thysson of the true facts about yourself."

"Not yet," said Rollison. "Listen …"

Not once, during the next five minutes, did Poincet touch his glass. His smile began slowly and became beatific. When Rollison had finished, the detective was wholly speechless.

The car from Yvonne arrived for Rollison on the dot; he had not driven himself once since reaching Paris, and regretted it. He did not regret the comfort of this limousine, and contrasted it with the Renault used by Madame Thysson. This time the blinds were not drawn, but he did not pay much attention to the route. It was a short journey, and at a quarter to seven he found himself outside a house on the Rue de Marin, not far from the Rue de l'Arbre.

He was taken to the first floor, and admitted by a prim, middle-aged maid to the *appartement,* which was furnished with modern furniture, tasteful, delightful. The colour scheme was blue and grey, the lighting was subdued. In a small room, Yvonne-was sitting on a couch, with a magazine open in front of her, and she looked up as if she hadn't realised that he was coming. Her lashes swept her cheeks for a moment, the seductive smile played at her lips. She stretched up her arms and drew him down to her.

He went on one knee, extravagantly.

"Must I worship?" he asked.

"Don't you want to?"

"Beauty *is* a shrine."

He moved his head back and studied her with one-eyebrow raised. She was superbly made-up, but for one thing; she had on no lipstick. He brushed-his lips against hers, and drew back again.

"Short of handkerchiefs?" he asked.

"You are being too English," she said. "I am short of nothing."

"I'll live to prove it," Rollison said, and pulled her up suddenly, until they were standing face to face; then he kissed her. She yielded against him, and they were close together for what seemed a long time; again she was breathless when he let her go.

"Not so very English," she said. "Are you all ready for tomorrow night?"

“Must I skip a day?”

She laughed. “I think perhaps you should prove by results that you are as good as you have convinced Paul you are.” It was the first time she had used de Vignon’s Christian name. “There must be a consideration for favours. The target for tomorrow’s charity is ten million francs.”

“It’s bespoken.”

“Bespoken?”

“Promised,” Rollison explained.

“Paul will be delighted! And I think you will be, too.”

Rollison laughed, turned away and poured out drinks at an open cocktail cabinet. He carried gin and Italian to her, and had a sherry himself. He offered her cigarettes, and she refused. She took the drink, but stared at him with a fixed expression, as if she were trying to understand what had passed through his mind when he had laughed.

“What is funny?” she demanded.

“Success tomorrow.” He raised his glass.

“That is serious.”

“So you think so,” said Rollison, and laughed again. “I’m beginning to understand why Paul has made such heavy weather of it so long. One needs imagination as well as organising ability to make a real success of anything like this. But Paul’s the boss.”

“I do not understand you,” said Yvonne. How could you? He’s trained you.”

“I am not sure that I like what you are saying, and I am sure that Paul would not.”

“We don’t have to be as brothers,” said Rollison. “My dear, a word in your ear.”

He crossed to her, held his glass in his left hand and slid his right arm round her waist. He drew her close, and let his cheek touch hers. In front of them was a mirror; the reflection would have pleased most people, and there was a bright glow in Rollison’s eyes in contrast to the frown of uncertainty in Yvonne’s.

“Who will be at the Ball tomorrow?”

“All Paris.”

“All the rich people of Paris,” corrected Rollison.

“Only they matter. I still do not understand.”

“The men, of course, will come by themselves.”

“Absurd! It will be the event of the season, the greatest for many years. The women—”

“Oh, so you know they’re coming. And what do you think they will be wearing? If you say ‘clothes’ I shall refuse to kiss you ever again.” He laughed at her reflection, but no longer saw a puzzled gleam; she understood. Her eyes shone, she turned so abruptly that she knocked his glass and wine fell on to his hand; neither of them appeared to notice it.

“Jewels,” she breathed.

“Jewels,” agreed Rollison soberly.

“But the police will be there.”

“Of course they will, and in strength. I’m told that a certain Poincet is so worried by the size of the ball and the brilliance of the gathering, that he will be there in person. Now, Yvonne, breathe this into Paul’s ears. The police, being on duty, will need a little refreshment. It is proper to offer them wine and food. But usually they get little, it is all done casually, and no one is really interested. Tomorrow, there will be special catering for the police, if Paul has the sense to pay for it. Not extravagant, but thoughtful; and it will include the particular Bordeaux wine which Poincet likes most. I will arrange it myself. I am told that Poincet cannot resist that wine.”

“It is true.” Yvonne moistened her lips.

“And there can be just a little drug in the wine which the police take. Not much, sufficient to make them drowsy, and sluggish. They will start yawning, and be ashamed to let their colleagues see it, and hurry out. At the time when the drug begins to take effect—*voilà*! Hasn’t M’sieu le Comte the men and the wits to take advantage of sleeping policemen and bejewelled beauties? It is so simple.”

“Simple!” breathed Yvonne.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bal Masqué

"My, my!" said Rollison, admiringly. "You look beautiful. I didn't know an Englishman could dress like it. Turn round. Let me look at you. If Jolly were here I'd get him to take a photograph, you're worth preserving."

Latimer, in evening-dress, was not amused.

"Did you ask me to come simply to be funny?"

"I'm being serious. But it's not why I invited you. Pete, you asked for a scoop."

"I did." Latimer looked eager. "Is anything really going to break? I've come especially for this, and had a devil of a job to make the old man let me. He thinks you're going to the dogs, the lure of the fleshpots has been too strong for you. I shouldn't be surprised if he's right, too."

The newspaperman's eagerness did not wholly fade.

"Except that it's nothing new, he's right. Have a special telephone reserved for yourself tonight. Not at the Palace, but somewhere just outside. There'll be such a scramble for telephones at one stage in the evening that you'll never get your scoop unless you're off to a lightning start."

Latimer considered.

"Do you mean this?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry, Pete, but that's the lot."

"Well, I suppose I mustn't grumble," said Latimer. "Sure it'll come off? Can I ask London to hold some space?"

"As much space as they'll give to the biggest sensation in Paris since the Liberation."

Latimer threw up his hands.

"I don't think it ever occurs to you that you could make a mistake, does it?"

"Mistakes? I litter life with them! But this isn't a hunch, this is certain knowledge. Keep a special eye on the policemen, including Papa Poincet."

Latimer rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You've got that saint-cum-devil look about you again. I suppose it couldn't be possible that my old man's right, and you've gone completely off your rocker."

"Is anything impossible?"

Latimer looked uneasy, but didn't speak again. Rollison let him out of the room, and he was then escorted from the Royal Suite by a quietly dressed flunkey who had been given the privilege of waiting on Rollison. Rollison strolled across to the window and looked out on to the busy road, at the seething mass of traffic and people. It was nearly half-past six; rush hour was later in Paris than in London.

He went into the room which had been turned into an office for the

business of the *Bal Masqué.* An excited but tired little middle-aged woman, exquisitely dressed, was standing at the desk with a bundle of papers in her hands; they were cheques. She had a dazed look as she glanced at Rollison, and beckoned him; as if her heart were too full for words.

"Good news?" asked Rollison, joining her.

"I can hardly believe it," she stabbed a finger at a sheet of paper on the desk, covered with figures. "Regard that, Mr. Rollison. The total already received is twenty-five million francs. Twenty-five million!"

"Twenty-five thousand pounds," murmured Rollison. "No, it isn't bad."

"Not bad! It is miraculous. The poor of Paris will owe you an everlasting debt."

"Owe me?" Rollison looked startled. "I've had the fun, you and the committee have done the work. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next day when you're all rested, we'll have a little celebration. I hate to say it, but if you are to be ready in time to come and see the great climax, you'll have to hurry."

"I *had* to make up the total," she said, and took Rollison's arm. "The good God will thank you."

Rollison looked embarrassed; when he came back from the door, after seeing her out, he still wore a faint look of embarrassment. He went into the office and studied the figures; the big donors and the small ones, on list after list of names and addresses. There was a mark against those whom de Vignon had named; these were the really wealthy. Each was married; each man's wife, that night, would be weighed down with jewels.

Rollison's lips curved. Had Latimer seen him then, he would have said that the Devil had exorcised the saint.

There was a knock at the outer door, and he strolled into the main room. Men were talking outside, and the door opened to admit the flunkey; and behind the flunkey stood Jolly.

"M'sieu, this gentleman—" the flunkey began.

"Always tells the truth! Come in, Jolly." Jolly slid by, and Rollison gripped his hand. "I couldn't let you miss *the* big moment." He drew his man farmer into the room, and Jolly's eyes glowed with deep pleasure. "How are you?"

"Mademoiselle Odette is very well, sir," said Jolly mischievously.

"So she should be, after five weeks under your influence. No trouble with her?"

"None at all. As you instructed, I have arranged for Bill Ebbutt and others to guard the flat, and all the arrangements went off perfectly. The Frenchman has not been near for the last few days, in my opinion he no longer thinks that he serves a useful purpose. At no time has he offered any threat."

"Just a watching brief," said Rollison. "She hasn't said any more?"

"No, sir," said Jolly. "I don't want to hurry you, but if you are to be ready in good time you should start dressing. I left your costume with the valet here, and it should be along very soon."

An hour and a half later, Rollison stood in front of a full-length mirror and surveyed his reflection. He did not recognise anything of himself. The costume fitted perfectly. The mask, specially made in London, was cunningly contrived; Mephisto to the life. It was pliable and fitted snugly, and the short horns stuck out of his forehead with wisps of what looked like smoke, coming out of them. At the feet, the cloven hoofs seemed real. The red body of the dress had a dull, mottled finish, giving an impression of smouldering heat.

Rollison murmured: "I wonder what the Devil would think if he were looking at himself, Jolly."

Jolly, severe in black and white, smiled indulgently.

"Not at all what you are thinking, sir."

"You ask Latimer," said Rollison cryptically, and turned away. "Don't be late yourself. I'll point out Yvonne Blanc as soon as I can, and you're to watch her closely. If Madame Thysson turns up, I'll point her out, too—but Yvonne first. All clear?"

"Perfectly clear, sir," said Jolly.

Outside the Palace, cars were crowded in a hopeless jam, but drivers somehow sorted themselves out. Excited *gendarmes* rushed hither and thither, swinging their white batons, blowing their shrill whistles. A cordon of them were lined up on the other side of the road, beneath an avenue of chestnut-trees, and in front of wooden barricades which had been erected to keep the sightseers from pressing too close. The crowd had gathered hours before the first revellers had arrived, there were thousands of them now, and fresh throngs were arriving; many poor, many old, many more young. From here they could see the floodlit steps of the Palace and the great entrance hall, where beauty foregathered and where laughter already rippled on the air.

Near the doorway, just inside and beneath a bright light, stood a plump clown; an ordinary clown to look at. He watched the wealthy arrive, the harlequins and shepherdesses, the gallants and the dairy maids, the Grecian beauties and the Roman gods, the savages and the space men; past, present and future were represented, moving in a steady stream down the two wide passages which led to the ballroom.

The plump clown saw Mephisto arrive, and stared with bright-blue eyes from his white, mask-like face. He shook his head. Mephisto – the third one to arrive, but dressed most perfectly, with the very look of the Devil about him – raked the entrance hall with his gaze, and then went on, his cloak swinging behind him. At times there seemed to be more clowns than any other disguises here; for every clown was from the Police Department.

The plump clown moved towards the ballroom.

There, a distinguished personage, the only man in evening-dress and revered by all France, received the guests. Already the ballroom was thronged and the orchestra was playing. In the large anterooms refreshments were being served, drink was flowing. The Devil was by

himself, standing in the doorway of one of the ante-rooms, when the plump clown passed him.

"Well dressed, Poincet," whispered Mephisto.

The plump clown missed a step, then turned towards the man in red.

"It is you, my friend?"

"Myself to the life."

"I would not disagree," said Poincet. "One look at you makes me more nervous than I am."

"Nervous?"

"It could succeed, it could fail. Have you seen the jewels? What fools they are to bring them! No, no, I will not be told that most are imitation, I know real jewels when I see them. There is a treasure-house here tonight."

"You'll catch your treasure-hunters."

"If I do not, I shall know where to come," said Poincet meaningly. "Madame Thysson, I understand, will be here as Joan of Arc."

"A nice touch."

"Is de Vignon here?"

"Probably. I advised him not to come, but he isn't likely to take that kind of advice. Don't forget to make sure all the clowns have their refreshment, if de Vignon isn't here himself, he has his spies." Rollison moved away, towards a shepherdess who stood by herself, her pretty mask turned towards him.

"Will you dance with the Devil?" he murmured.

She turned, and her laughing eyes were close to his.

"Have you finished with the dangerous clown?"

"Dangerous?"

"That is Papa Poincet."

"He will soon be asleep," said Rollison. He took her arm and led her towards one of the buffets. The crowd was now so thick that it was difficult to get through. Jolly, wearing only an eye mask, was nearby, and Rollison caught his eye and nodded. In the ballroom the crush eased a little.

Yvonne leaned heavily on his arm. You will make Paul jealous."

"Why tonight, especially?" He also thought of the Devil."

"The trouble with Paul is that he's a fool. He shouldn't have come. The police will recognise him, and if they know he's been here—"

"They will ask questions," said Yvonne, sipping her drink. "He will be able to answer them. In fact, he will be able to prove that he was not here! How can a man be in two places at the same time?"

"He's the Boss, my sweet."

"I am glad you realise that," said Yvonne.

She danced well, seemed to give herself completely to the gaiety. Any doubts of the success of the ball had gone, the changing colours of the lights, the fantastic gaiety of the costumes, the rippling of laughter, the urgent quest for beauty and excitement, all came and quickened the pulse of the thousands present. The vast ballroom was thronged, the great chandeliers scintillated, and the jewels, on broad bosoms and round slim or scraggy

necks, on the wrists and in the hair of the women, gave a kind of shimmering brightness.

Rollison lost Yvonne.

He watched the clowns, a few dancing, most standing at the doorways or at the sides, near the boxes. There were no tables in the ballroom, but the anterooms were still crowded. The smaller rooms, thrown open, harboured careless lovers catching at fleeting joy. Twice Rollison saw de Vignon, unmistakable to anyone who knew him, dressed in shimmering red – Rollison stiffened the third time he saw him.

He was dancing with Joan of Arc.

The mask-like face of Madame Thysson looked different now, more real because there were so many masks. Rollison watched them for a while. De Vignon was laughing. The dance was a waltz, and they danced together superbly; as if they had often danced together. He wondered what thoughts of bitterness and hatred were going through the woman's mind. Then his attention was distracted.

"Madame Thysson?" asked Jolly.

"Joan of Arc."

"Thank you, sir. The police have had their refreshment, in two relays."

"Good. The fun starts in an hour."

Jolly moved away, Latimer took his place. He had been dancing and was dabbing his forehead with a big silk handkerchief.

"So you're in your true colours at last," he said. "I wasn't sure you were here until I saw Jolly. You haven't brought Odette here, have you?"

"I have not, yet!"

"When does the fun start?"

"Watch the police for the first yawns."

"Yawns," said Latimer, frowning.

"And keep near the door."

"What wall this?"

Rollison laughed and as the dance ended threaded his way through the crowd, guided by de Vignon's height and upthrusting horns. De Vignon, apparently unconcerned, left Joan of Arc with a rascally looking Robespierre, whose dark eyes had a familiar frankness.

Rollison bowed low.

"Madame, may I have the pleasure?" He spoke in his ordinary speaking voice, and his eyes seemed to mock her. He saw the "revolutionary" start, and Madame Thysson's eyes narrowed, then became like gimlets.

"Must I always dance with the Devil?"

"You've flirted with him often enough," said Rollison. He carried her away as the next dance came, an old-fashioned waltz; the ballroom became a whirling panorama of colour and beauty; and Madame Thysson danced as if the music were in her blood.

"Why desert your friends?" Rollison asked. "Aren't they outside, behind the barricades?"

"They won't stay there too long," she said.

"They'll stay as long as necessary, and you know it. Why did you come here tonight?"

"I wanted to see the devilry for myself."

"In the form of twenty-five million francs for charity?"

"And how much for the Devil himself?"

Rollison laughed. "There will be an interval," he said. "I would like the first dance after that, with you. We shall talk of the Devil and his disciples, and you shall tell me exactly what you think of me, and—I will perhaps hand to you all the evidence I have against Odette."

Her hand tightened on his.

"Is that true?"

"You have only to dance with me again, to find out."

They finished dancing, and he took her back to her rascal, the young, fresh-faced man who had taken him to the house in the country. He bowed low and turned away, and then walked towards the main entrance. He stood for a few minutes in the cooler air, and saw the surging crowds across the road – closer, now, the barricades had been brought nearer. Some venturesome youths had come close to the steps, and the *gendarmes* were driving them away with their batons. They offered little resistance, the encounter was mostly good-humoured. He saw the plump Papa Poincet, wiping his neck and forehead, and caught a glimpse of Yvonne, watching him. He ignored Poincet and went to the girl.

"Why did you come out here?" she asked.

"I must have drunk out of the wrong bottle, I was beginning to feel sleepy."

"If the police drank out of the wrong bottles—"

Rollison said: "Look at Papa Poincet."

The plump clown was smothering a yawn behind a pink hand. He snatched his hand away, and looked almost shame-faced. Rollison took Yvonne's arm and led her through the ballroom; and here and there a clown was yawning. Two turned abruptly and went into one of the ante-rooms.

Yvonne said in a tense voice: "It will succeed."

"Half an hour from now, there need not be a single jewel left in the room."

"I feel—suffocated!"

"You'll recover from that," said Rollison. "Everything's ready, I hope?"

"Our men are here, mingling with the guests."

"De Vignon?"

"He will stay."

"He's a fool," said Rollison, dispassionately.

He left her, and knew that she was watching him narrowly. She had not exaggerated when she had said that she felt suffocated; she was on edge, the next fifteen minutes would drag at her heels like lead. He saw de Vignon, dancing; laughing and gay. Latimer was near the door, looking at the yawning clowns; his mask did not hide his frown.

Jolly approached.

“I omitted to say, sir, that your stick is where you asked me to put it.”
“Thanks,” said Rollison.
Jolly moved away.
Soon, quite suddenly and loud above the music came the roar of a shot.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Devil's Triumph

It came from the platform where the orchestra played, and three men leapt up to it, brandishing revolvers. Those near pressed back. The music stopped abruptly, except for two violins, and these soon faded. At the back, people were calling out. One of the men on the platform fired twice, into the air; there was a sudden tense hush, uncanny in its completeness; and then a woman screamed. Some turned and fled towards the main doors; and they closed slowly, men stood in front of them, in fancy dress and brandishing guns. Here and there a clown rushed forward, only to be tripped up; but most of the clowns had disappeared.

A woman screamed: "*Non, non!"*

One of the trio on the platform pulled the microphone towards him, and his voice came the shocked quiet.

"All attention, please! If you do as you are told no one will be hurt. The ladies will immediately take off their jewels and give them to the men who come to collect. Please, there must be no delay.

Rollison, standing near the platform, saw a tall cavalier draw a sword which glinted in the light – and a shot rang out. The man's sword clattered, a woman screamed again, the man clapped a hand to a bleeding wrist. There was a sigh, of mingled horror and fear. Three women fainted; Rollison saw the crowd give way as they fell and men tried to save them.

Masked men, some in evening-dress and some in costumes, moved among the throng, carrying large open sacks. The women dropped their jewels into them, some hastily, as if the gems burned them, some reluctantly. Here and there, a thief snatched the jewels from a woman's throat, or pulled them roughly from her hands. At each door armed men stood waiting to resist any sign of revolt, but there was none. Over by the main door, Latimer stood still. Jolly was near him.

Rollison heard a movement behind him. A man whispered: "It is magnificent!"

"The Devil's triumph," Rollison said.

He didn't turn round, and de Vignon did not stop, but moved a little farther away.

Close to Rollison, watching him, was Madame Thysson.

The thieves moved swiftly, the sacks became heavy, the sparkle of the night had gone. Women were crying genuine tears of grief, as for the loss of something beloved. The main doors opened for the first time; the guard by them was doubled. The first sacks were taken through. Through the open doors it was possible to see clowns, stretched out on the floor, others sitting in chairs and leaning back, as if unconscious. The crying continued, like a wave of despair. A stream of men carrying the sacks went through to the

front entrance, where cars were drawn up. Across the dark road, the throng of people at the barricades watched, in strange, unexpected silence. The gendarmes among them were leaning back against the barricades, yawning or inert.

Rollison saw Madame Thysson move; and her Robespierre came with her. She stood in front of Rollison, and he could see scorn, perhaps hatred, in her eyes.

"Now are you satisfied? Now are you pleased?"

"Silence, madame!"

"You may fool the rest, but I know—"

Rollison gripped her arm.

"Silence, if you please!" He spoke in French, angrily.

The men on the platform jumped down and ran along the path made by the men who had taken the jewels. They brandished their guns, while others by the main doors stood on guard. The last man went out, the door swung to.

Robespierre knocked Rollison's arm away.

"I have a mind to kill you," he said harshly.

"Postpone it," Rollison said. "Madame! This is my dance.

It was absurd. There was no music, only a fresh burst of lamenting. Men who had been cowed became brave and rushed towards the doors, hammering, thumping and kicking on them. The din almost drowned the sound of nearer voices.

"Come on." Rollison took Madame Thysson's arm and led her to the nearer door, the first to open. He raced with her, towards the front, with her escort close behind. A stream of people followed. The last of the thieves had reached the main hall by now, but there was a sound of footsteps here, against a background of the roar in the great room. Other doors opened and men burst out, but Rollison and Madame Thysson were among the first to reach the front hall. As he went, Rollison picked up his gold-topped stick, which was behind an alcove curtain.

Madame Thysson stopped, abruptly.

The clowns were no longer on the floor or reclining, but lined up in the great doorway and at the top of the steps; each one was armed. Over their heads, Rollison and Madame Thysson saw the forty or fifty men, de Vignon's thieves, crowded about their cars, some inside, some outside. They were frightened both by the armed police behind them and by the sudden roar from the people across the road. The people who had come to watch beauty and wealth now broke the barricades, the gendarmes there were helpless. The crowd surged upon the cars and the men who were trying desperately to get away. Sticks, arms and boots began to rise and fall, there was an ugly, savage roar.

Madame Thysson's fingers quivered on Rollison's arm. She looked at him.

"What—what *is* this?"

"Your friends are getting their own back," Rollison said. "A whisper was started among them a few minutes ago—that thieves were going to snatch

the proceeds of the ball, all of which are to go to the Good Society. Your friends don't approve. M'sieu le Comte's friends are not going to enjoy themselves."

"And—you *knew* this?"

Rollison laughed.

"Papa Poincet and I are good friends, madame!"

A woman came hurrying towards them, as if she were pursued by the Devil himself; and she was. The Devil, in the shape of de Vignon, was only a few yards behind her, thrusting his way through the crowd. The woman's face seemed distorted, even behind the mask, and she kept shouting a name.

"Richard—Richard—*Richard!"*

Rollison swung round. Yvonne Blanc reached him, grasping for breath, clutched his hand and cried: "He's coming, he'll kill you. Run—"

Rollison exclaimed: "You, a *friend,* Yvonne?"

"Never mind that, he's coming!"

Rollison turned – the only man to look away from the road. The crowd was pressing closer to the open doors, to watch the shambles outside. De Vignon's men, completely at the mercy of the mob, were being beaten, kicked, scratched and torn. A cordon of policemen "clowns", all armed, surrounded the cars and the sacks of precious stones. All that, Rollison knew; the roar was in his ears, but he didn't notice it, for he had time only for de Vignon. In his devil's guise the big man came on, drawing nearer slowly, looking only at Rollison.

"Get away!" cried Yvonne. "Get away!"

Rollison went forward. De Vignon thrust two men aside – and for the first time Rollison saw the knife in his hand – a long knife, glittering. De Vignon didn't speak but raised his hand, and the women behind him cried out, men shouted. De Vignon lunged at Rollison, the knife swept down. Rollison raised the stick, caught the blade on it, sent it spinning out of de Vignon's hand. The man made no attempt to retrieve it, but thrust out both hands, the fingers curled. Rollison tossed the stick high into the air, as the crowd swayed back, away from the madman. He felt de Vignon's hands clutch at his throat, and drove his fist into the man's stomach. De Vignon gasped and his hands dropped. Rollison hit out with a jab to the chin, but de Vignon slipped the blow and came on again, his eyes smouldering, his lips twisted, his pointed teeth like fangs. He smashed a blow at Rollison's head, then kicked at him.

Rollison covered up against the kick, and flung himself at the man. The cries of the people merged with the harsh breathing of de Vignon. They fell, rolled over, and for a deadly moment de Vignon was on top. Rollison felt the hands take his head, raise it – and smash it down on the marble floor. Pain surged through him, weakness numbed his muscles – and then he heard a shot, sharp and clear.

His head fell, but not heavily.

He felt de Vignon slump on to him, and he could scarcely breathe. Then men pulled de Vignon away. Spots of blood fell on to Rollison's face, warm,

nauseating. Yvonne reached him and helped him to sit up, but he hardly noticed her. His vision was blurred, but one thing stood out: Madame Thysson, with a small, smoking automatic pistol in her hand.

De Vignon's eyes were open, his lips parted. Madame Thysson stared at him – and then slowly took off her mask.

"Now, Paul, you know me," she said softly.

De Vignon cried: "No, no!" He stretched out a trembling hand. "It is impossible!"

"Your own wife killed you," said Madame Thysson. "And I am glad, it is like killing the Devil."

De Vignon's eyes were glaring, his lips worked. Then suddenly he collapsed.

Several clowns broke through the ring, among them Papa Poincet.

Papa Poincet, looking more than a little ridiculous with his powdered and painted face, straightened up from de Vignon. The man lay on a couch in one of the small rooms. Rollison, Madame Thysson and Yvonne were also there, with two other policemen. Papa Poincet nodded and sniffed, and said: "Yes, yes. He is dead. I am sorry. I would have liked to have supervised that departure myself. But—perhaps it does not much matter." Poincet smiled, and looked grotesque. "There will be a hundred witnesses to say that you were justified in killing your husband, madame."

Madame Thysson did not speak.

"And so, I need not now detain you," Papa Poincet said. "M'sieu Rollison, you are feeling better?"

"I'm all right."

"Excellent," said the detective. "We shall meet tomorrow, when there is less emotion to disturb the atmosphere. And, perhaps, less mystery. You are Mademoiselle Blanc?" He turned his piercing eyes on Yvonne.

"That is so."

"Grieving, no doubt, grieving," said Papa Poincet. He sniffed. "Mr. Rollison, you will find another room at your service, I am told."

"Thanks," said Rollison, "but we're not quite ready to go. Did you get the jewels?"

"All of them, yes, we prevented them from being distributed among the crowd! No doubt most of their owners will feel grateful, insurance companies should also feel grateful, the fund will increase considerably and be distributed by the Good Society. Good! But it is not, I think, always wise to do good by stealth." He bowed to Madame Thysson. "It is not possible for the authorities to close their eyes indefinitely, madame."

He went to the door and opened it.

There was no one outside except Madame Thysson's Robespierre. He joined them as they walked towards another small room. Jolly lingered at a distance. They could hear the sounds of dance music, and not far off, a group of people laughing; it would not be normal, but it would be happier.

They went into the room.

Madame Thysson said: “I think I understand now, Mr. Rollison. You completely deceived me, as well as Yvonne.” She stretched out her hand, and Yvonne took it. “Yvonne worked for me, but de Vignon did not know that. That was how I knew about your plans.”

Rollison moved unexpectedly, pulled Yvonne towards him and kissed her. She drew back, but there was gaiety in her eyes.

“I meant it, that time,” said Rollison. “You fooled me completely, ma chèrie. Did de Vignon really have a spy in your camp, madame?”

“He believed that Yvonne was his spy. Yvonne’s brother was a reckless young man, as weak as she is strong, and was completely subjugated by de Vignon. We did not know that until it was too late to stop him from going to London with Odette.”

“Who is Odette?” Rollison asked.

“She is my daughter,” said Madame Thysson. “De Vignon’s step-daughter. I had tried to keep her identity from him, but he found out, and with Marcel’s help, kidnapped her. He did not know that the Madame Thysson he hated was his wife.”

“Now I understand why you used a mask,” said Rollison.

“Lately, de Vignon began to feel the effect of my work against him,” went on Madame Thysson. “He knew that I was working with the Good Society, knew that I found ways and means of tricking him. He did not know why. He could not believe that I had no criminal motive—he was a man who did not believe in goodness.” She paused, and there was silence, but it was reposeful, all tension had gone. “He thought that the reputation which was being built up as Madame Thysson was a true one, that I would depose him from his eminence. Eminence! And so he plotted to take Odette away, using Marcel. How he made Odette doubt me, I don’t know—”

“By telling her what you’d already made half the truth,” said Rollison. “Of your reputation.”

“Perhaps. I was pleased to think that Odette would be away from Paris. The next I heard was that she was with you, that there had been grave trouble. I had a man watch your home. He told me that she was well. I did not want her back in Paris, because she would be in greater danger here than there. When you arrived here, I was confused, but—I had heard of your work in London. It was a long time before I would believe anything that Yvonne told me about you.”

Rollison smiled. “Never believe Yvonne!”

“What really did happen in London?” asked Madame Thysson.

“Supposing we ask Odette?” suggested Rollison, mildly.

“Odette! But she is in—”

“Jolly!” called Rollison.

The door opened almost at once, and Odette came in.

Two lovely women stood for a moment, eyes glowing; and then they moved towards each other. Soon, Odette began to talk.

An excited Latimer came through the ballroom, where most of the revellers had gathered, found Rollison dancing with Yvonne, and refused to be sent away. They walked towards a passage and into one of the smaller rooms. Yvonne went off, and Latimer watched her go.

"Nice," he said thoughtfully. "Rolly, the job was magnificent, but I still don't know how you did it."

Didn't you get your scoop?"

"The story of a lifetime, I'll die happy after this, but—*how,* Rolly? Off the record."

Rollison shrugged.

"Papa Poincet would tell you. We hatched a little plot. I put de Vignon up to the trick of staging the robbery, and promised him all the police would be drugged. When they began to yawn and fall about all over the place, he thought it was easy, so his men just came and lifted the stuff. But the police woke up unexpectedly—there must have been something wrong with the drug!—and there were reinforcements waiting. For rough justice, I spread a rumour through the crowd outside. Anyone killed?"

"Only de Vignon, but a lot of others are wrecks. The jails are crowded! I was first to a telephone by five minutes. Didn't I see you with a trio of lovelies, half an hour ago?"

"Lovelies is the word. Including Odette," Rollison agreed. "Jolly brought her over, and kept her in a safe place until all was well. She is Madame Thysson's daughter, but I shouldn't use that, you've scooped enough for one night."

"Oh, well, I said off the record," Latimer conceded.

"Thanks. It was a fight between Madame and de Vignon, and eventually Odette, her daughter, was the deciding factor. Madame loved her better, as they say, than life itself. Odd truths in *clichés* sometimes. De Vignon planned to kidnap her, and then blackmail his hated enemy into submission. He did not know that Madame Thysson was his wife."

"Did you?"

"Poincet dropped a hint," Rollison said. "The plot might have worked but for the refusal of Lady Murren to play. Odette's now talked freely. Lady Murren had had a hand in currency smuggling and other things, and was to take charge of Odette, but she refused, probably getting cold feet. Downing tried to compel her, she threatened to call the police, and Downing killed her."

"Downing, was it? Which reminds me, he's rather faded out of the picture. Any idea—"

"None," said Rollison firmly. "Wherever he is, he may stay. Downing and Marcel panicked and took the girl to the East End. They decided to kill her, but Odette heard them say so. She knew they'd killed Lady Murren between them, and took a chance to escape. Bert Noddy happened to be coming out of the house, and—you know the rest."

"Oh, no," said Latimer heavily. "Why did Odette pretend to lose her memory? Why didn't she come across?"

"Easy," said Rollison. "She didn't want to get her mother into trouble. She simply wouldn't say a word to damn her mother, was in a tormented frame of mind, and only wanted to forget. She's young, only lately from a convent, and perhaps not quite of this world. Call it fey. If she ever gives anyone an ominous warning, they'd be wise to take notice. She simply tried to shut the past out of her mind, and thought the less she said, the better. No good could come of talking or remembering. She was terrified, two of the men who'd tried to kill her were still at large. I was a kind of protector, and she was frightened by what might happen if I went away. I think I can understand Odette. She might have had her own way but for a moment of delirium, when she mentioned Madame Thysson. If she hadn't made that slip—" Rollison shrugged.

"You'd have combed Paris for Sam Downing, and got at it somehow," Latimer said. "I hand you everything you want, on a gold plate."

Rollison shuddered.

"Not gold. It reminds me of a certain Devil."

"I wonder why Odette called her mother Madame Thysson?"

"She was trained and used to that—it was one of Madame Thysson's precautions to prevent the Count from discovering Odette's identity."

"And what made you wonder if Madame Thysson was a sheep in wolf's clothing?" Latimer asked.

"I liked the people who worked for her," Rollison said. "A woman in the true de Vignon tradition wouldn't have dealt so leniently with me on the night that I broke into her *appartement.* And she wouldn't have been so shocked when I first talked of Odette. When I knew that she was connected with the Good Society, I didn't doubt her any longer. Poincet always knew the truth, and thought it better to let the two fight it out for themselves. He knew that one day he'd have a chance to come down heavily on the side of the angels."

"Angels," echoed Latimer. "Yes, I see what you mean."

A week later, in the living-room at Gresham Terrace, Rollison stood on tip-toe, took down the top hat which for years had been at the highest point on the trophy wall, and found another place for it. Then Jolly came in, with a pair of steps, a hammer and two nails.

"My job," Rollison said. He climbed up, fixed two nails into the picture-rail, then took a tissue-paper packet from inside his coat. He unwrapped it, and looked thoughtfully at Madame Thysson's mask, then placed it in position. When Jolly returned, after taking the steps away, Rollison was smiling up at the mask.

"It is a very beautiful mask," said Jolly. "Quite our best exhibit, sir, don't you think?"

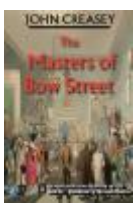
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street

This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*

2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

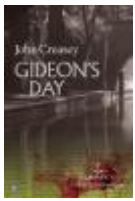
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

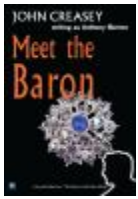


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

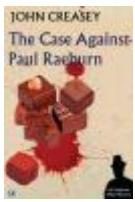


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

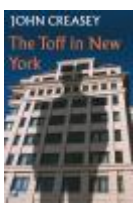
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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